

5 | Vowel Constellations and Secret Language

This chapter deals with an aspect of the Nag Hammadi texts often portrayed as one of the reasons why they do not fit into a Christian context, namely, the many passages displaying different constellations of vowels. These have not been neglected in previous research but have mainly been treated separately, in light of the particular text and their specific context, as representing their ‘pagan’ origin. This chapter focuses on the question of why this phenomenon appears in an otherwise chiefly Christian text collection and how they would have been understood and used by those who owned, copied and read them. The vowel constellations are of particular interest for a study, such as this one, examining the material and visual features of the Nag Hammadi texts, although in an inverted sense. Magical vowel constellations often constitute a striking visual aspect of the ancient texts in which they are found – but not here. The vowels are not highlighted in the Nag Hammadi texts, as they are, for example, in many of the sources in *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM).¹ What can this *lack* of visibility indicate?

The chapter continues the hypothesis presented in the previous two chapters, introducing the magical evidence from the codices and suggesting that Christian monks would have been very interested in their magical vowel features. It begins by discussing the passages and texts that contain such features, with a brief description of their ancient Helleno-Egyptian context, situated mainly

¹ See also *The Books of Jeu*, passim, in *The Books of Jeu and The Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, ed. Carl Schmidt, trans. V. MacDermot (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

within the traditions associated with Hermes Trismegistus and the Sethians. This magical context is then read in light of the legacy of the apostle Paul and the Christian texts of the Nag Hammadi codices – particularly those belonging to the Valentinian traditions – concerning holy sounds and words. Christian texts are seldom brought into the discussion when magical vowel features are explored, since the latter have mainly been associated with the broader pagan context; it is as if Christianity was in some way disconnected from its intellectual and social milieu. Lastly, the discussion of the magical vowel traditions found in the Nag Hammadi codices places them in the context of Pachomian monasticism, exploring how these features would have been read by Christian monks who spent most of their time in the inhospitable and menacing Egyptian desert. The conclusion reached will show that the magical vowel features of the Nag Hammadi texts would not have been regarded as at all strange or heterodox by early Christian monastics but, rather, have been viewed as a ritual feature with many parallels in monastic practice.

An Overview of Magical Vowels in the Nag Hammadi Texts

Magical vowel constellations appear in several Nag Hammadi codices, namely, in the following Sethian texts: *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* (otherwise known as *The Gospel of the Egyptians*) (Codex III,2 and IV,2); *Marsanes* (Codex X,1); *The Trimorphic Protennoia* (Codex XIII,1); and the Hermetic text *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (Codex VI,7). We also encounter vowels used in this way in the badly fragmented Sethian text, *Zostrianos*, in Codex VIII, but unfortunately, they were mostly present in the parts now lost.² These five texts all

² On page 118 line 18, we encounter three epsilons in a row in a part of the text where Barbelo praises the Great Invisible Spirit, and most likely in this part the other vowels are also mentioned as part of the hymn to God.

contain different renderings and/or repetitions of the Greek vowels α , ι , ϵ , η , γ , \omicron , ω . Before discussing how these magical aspects fit the larger context of the Nag Hammadi collection's use and background, let us begin by familiarising ourselves with these individual passages and the contexts in which they appear.

The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit (The Gospel of the Egyptians) (*NHC III,2/ NHC IV,2*)

This text is found in two versions, both are Coptic translations of what seems to be a Greek *Vorlage* but not necessarily the same Greek version, since there are some differences between the Coptic translations.³ The text explains the origins and constellation of the heavenly world consisting of an unknowable God who generates the trinity, Father, Mother (Barbelo) and Son, each made up of an Ogdoad (a constellation of eight beings/entities). Apart from these figures, a being called the Doxomedon (Lord of glory) permeates the whole heavenly world. He is described as a great chamber within which sits a throne. This throne room is filled with a number of beings, among them Christ and the race of Seth. The text then describes the nature of the 'trice male child' Seth and his seed, why they occupy the cosmos and how they can be brought back to the heaven whence they derived. Hymns are sung and prayers are offered to the heavenly world and the great invisible spirit. The third part of the trinity, the Son, is made up of an Ogdoad consisting of himself and the seven vowels of the alphabet. In the first part of the text, we encounter a passage where the three beings of the trinity praise the great invisible spirit by reciting the vowels (see Fig. 5.1):

³ For example, the version in Codex III has twice as many Greek words as that in Codex IV. Alexander Böhlig and Frederik Wisse suggest, however, that both texts are copies of earlier Coptic translations which is indicated by missing lines and the repetition of certain words, producing homoioteleuton (e.g. in *NHC III*, 55:21 and in *Codex IV*, 52:17). *Nag Hammadi Codices III,2 and IV,2*, ed. Alexander Böhlig and Frederik Wisse (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 1–17.

aaaaaaaaa	EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE	ω [ω ω ω ω ω ω ω ω]
aaaaaaaaa	ΔΔΔΔΔΔ[ΔΔΔΔ]	ω ω ω [ω ω ω ω ω ω ω]
ō ō ō ō ō ō ō ō ō ō ō ō ō ō ō ō ō	ΔΔΔΔΔΔΔΔΔΔ Δ ω	ΔΥω η†Ϟε [†Ϟομ†ε]
ō ō ō ō ō ō ō	ω ω ω ω ω ω [ω ω	ηβομ ΔΥειη [εεϞραϊ ηον]
And in this way the	ω] ω ω ω ω ω ω ω	Ϟομ ον μπινοβ η [ηατ ηαυ
three powers	ω ω ω ω ΔΥω	ερ]οϞ ΔΥω ηατϞ [αϞμϞ
brought praise to the	[η†εει] Ϟε	ηηατ† ρα]η εροϞ πι
great, invisible and	α†Ϟομ†ε ηβομ †	[παρθεηικον μ]ηηα ητε
incorruptible	Ϟμ ον επ[ηοβ]	η[ιωτ ΔΥω †Ϟοον†]
unnameable one, the	ηαϞορατον ηηηα	μπαρθεη[οϞ]
virginal spirit of the	ηατϞω μπ[εϞραη]	
Father and the male	μπαρθεηικον	
virgin. ⁴	ηακκητον μη [†εϞ]	
	αρσεικη ηπαρθεηη	

The latter part of the text consists of an intricate process of creation wherein a number of light beings play different parts in the process of bringing back the seed of Seth, now occupying materiality. A crucial part of the salvation act is when Seth is sent down to earth by four light beings (typical of Sethian tractates⁵) and provides his seed with the power of baptism.⁶ The text concludes with a hymnic portion. After the worthy people of Seth have undergone baptism and the ritual termed ‘the five seals’ to ensure that they ‘will not taste death’ (ηηεν Ϟι †πε μποϞ) (NHC IV, 78:9–10), they offer up to the heavens a hymn which is a briefer repetition of the above vowel recitations, a mirror of the heavenly praises of God.⁷

This text is at its core a Sethian tractate but also contains some Christian adaptations: for example, Christ who identified with Seth

⁴ Text and trans. (syncretic) by Böhlig and Wisse, in *Nag Hammadi Codex III,2 and IV,2*, ed. Böhlig and Wisse, 66–71.

⁵ Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered*, 30–41.

⁶ NHC III, 62:24–63:11; NHC IV, 74:9–74:24.

⁷ NHC III, 66:8–22; NHC IV, 78:10–79:3.

in the Doxomedon; earthly Seth, who is Jesus; and John the Baptist who is identified with a heavenly being called Yoel. The vowel constellations represent a way for the mystagogue to establish a direct link with the heavenly world by joining the divine beings in heaven in their praise of God.

Marsanes (*Codex X,1*)

This lengthy, dense text is the only one in Codex X. The title *Marsanes* is found on the last page of the approximately 68-page-long text; of these, 54 pages are in a partial, poorly preserved state, leaving only about 27 per cent of the text legible. Thus, any analysis of the content must ultimately be viewed as tentative.⁸ That being said, the first part of the text (1–10) and parts of the middle (25–42) are quite well preserved, which leaves us with a rough idea of what it contained. It is of Sethian origin and the genre is that of an apocalypse, with many Platonic points of reference.⁹ The name ‘Marsanes’ refers to a legendary prophet who was taken to heaven and witnessed things that he then related to people worthy of receiving knowledge of the divine state.¹⁰ The text reveals a variety of mysteries about the different levels of existence (material and immaterial), but one central aspect is to provide information about the descent of a saviour figure (Autogenes) and how people can attain ascension and escape through the different levels of existence. The material world is not rejected as evil or lost; rather, according to the text, it should be ‘saved entirely’ (5:24). The highest being is called the ‘silent one’ and ‘the three powered one’ and below him

⁸ The text is written in a Lykopolitan dialect, the same as, for example, Codex I, a dialect which was never standardised and thus there are many variations in spelling. *Nag Hammadi Codices X and IX*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 209–227, 229.

⁹ Dylan M. Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 48–76.

¹⁰ According to Epiphanius, he knew of seven holy books kept by the so-called Gnostics, one of them with the title ‘Marsianes’ (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26:2–13).

there are scores of heavenly beings, all of whom deserve praise. In order for people to traverse the heavenly spheres, it is necessary to gain the knowledge of their constitution, which is found in relations between different letters and sounds that correspond to the structure of the heavenly world as well as to the form of the human soul. Thus, Marsanes spends considerable time expanding on these topics and their importance to gaining deliverance from material restrictions. Below I quote the long passage 25:21–32:5, from the middle of the text, which illustrates its deep immersion in ancient traditions that attached the mysteries of letters and sounds to metaphysical and soteriological matters. Figure 5.2 showcases manuscript page 31 of Codex X, which is part of this long quote.

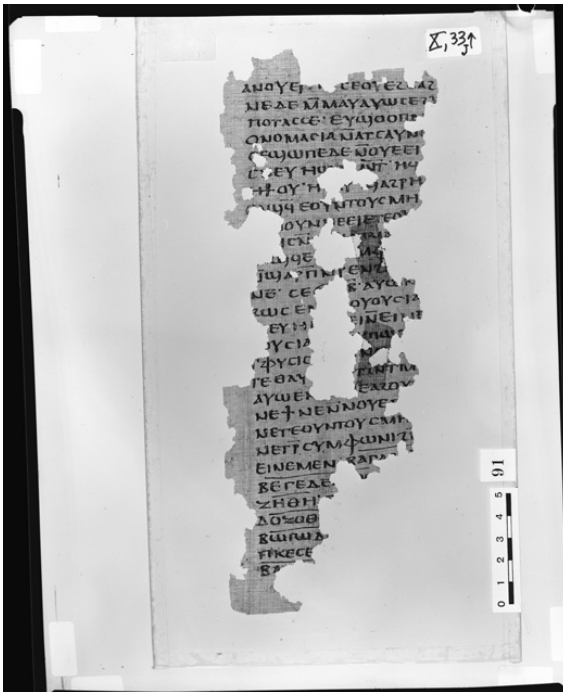


Figure 5.2 Page 31 of *Marsanes*, Codex X. Photo by Basile Psiroukis. Image courtesy of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Records, Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

The soul, on the other hand, has different shapes. The shape of the soul exists in this form, i.e. (the soul) that came into existence of its own accord. The shape is the second spherical part, while the first allows it, eéiou, the self-begotten soul, aeéiouó.

The second schema, eéiou, . . . by those having two sounds (diphthongs), the first being placed after them . . .

. . . (3 lines unrecoverable) . . . the light.

Control yourselves, receive the imperishable seed, bear fruit, and do not become attached to your possessions. But know that the oxytones exist among the vowels, and the diphthongs which are next to them. But the short are inferior, and the [. . .] are [. . .] by them. Those that [. . .], since they are intermediate [. . .]. The sounds of the semivowels are superior to the voiceless (consonants). And those that are double are superior to the semivowels, which do not change. But the aspirates are better than the inaspirates (of) the voiceless (consonants). And those that are intermediate will accept their

ΤΨΥΧΗ Θ[ΥΗΤ]ΕΣ ΘΩΩΣ ΔΗ
 ἄμεν (ἦρεν)εχνημα ε(ν)
 ὡββ[ειαι]τ εεωοοπ δε [θῆπι]
 ζματ ἦδι πσχη[ημα ἦ]τψυχη
 τενταρ[ωω]πε ογαεετ̄: ἦ[εχνη]
 μα δε οε[ι ἄπμαρσνευ] ἄμερος
 ἦσφαρ[ικον] ερεπωαρῖ ογηθ
 ἦσω[ε] ἔνηοῦ· ἦτψυχη ἦκπ[ο]
 ογαεετ̄: ἀνηοῦω [π]μαρσνευ
 ἦσχημα· ἐνηοῦ ἀβαλ θῖτῖ
 ἦ[ατς]μη σῖτε πωαρ[ῖ εφο]νηθ
 ἦσωοῦ πε [. . .]ον· αῦ[ω π]θ[. . .]οῦ
 π[. . .]εε[. . .]τῖἦ[. . .]οῦ θῖ [. . .]ε
 ἄπογαειν

ὡω[π αρ]ωτῖ ἦτετῖχι ἄ[πες]
 περμα ἦαττεκο [ἦτε]τῖτ
 καρπος· αῦω [ἦτε]τ[ῖ]τῖωωπε
 ερε[τ]ῖἦηπ ἀνετε νοῦτῖ [αλ]λα
 ἄμε κε πετχασι [σε]ωοοπ θῖ
 νετε οῦη[τοῦ] σμη ἄμεν· αῦω
 ἦ[τς]μη σῖτε ετωοοπ [ἦη]
 ἄθρῖ πεεῖ ἦβρα [χῦ λ]ε σεβαχῖ·
 αῦω ἦ[. . .]οῦε εεωοοπ [. . .].
 θῖτοοτ[οῦ]· πετ[. . .]ε εῦθῖ
 τμητε [.]· ἦσμη
 ἦτε[ἦθμηφωη]ον σεχασι ἀνετε
 ἄῖτοῦ σμη ἄμεν· πετκηβ̄ δε
 σεχ[α]σι ἀηα τπεωε ἦσμη
 εμαγῶββ̄ε· ἦλασῦ δε σεσατῖ
 ἀῖψιλον ἦ[ε] εἰ εμητοῦ σμη
 ἄμ[εῦ] πετθῖ τμητε δε
 ἦω[απ] πογδλαμλῖ ετοῦἦ[θῖ]

combination in which they are; they are ignorant of the things that are good. They (the vowels) are combined with the intermediates, which are less. Form by form, <they constitute> the nomenclature of the gods and the angels, not because they are mixed with each other according to every form, but only (because) they have a good function. It did not happen that <their> will was revealed.

Do not keep on sinning, and do not dare to make use of sin. But I am speaking to you (sg.) concerning the three [...] shapes of the soul. The third shape of the soul is [...] is a spherical one, put after it, from the simple vowels: eee, iii, ooo, uuu, óóó. The diphthongs were as follows: ai, au, ei, eu, Eu, ou, óu, oi, éi, ui, ói, auei, euéu, oiou, ggg, ggg, ggg, aiau, eieu, éu, oiou, óu, ggg, ggg, aueieu, oiou, Eu, three times for a male soul. The third shape is spherical. The second shape, being put after it, has two sounds. The male soul's third shape (consists) of the simple vowels: aaa, eee, ééé, iii, ooo, uuu, oóó', óóó, óóó. And this shape is different from the first, but they

τῶ· CEOEI ἦΤΑCΑΥΗ[Ε ἦ]
 ΝΕΤΗΛΑΝΟΥΥ· CΕ[ΘΛῪ]ΛΑΜῪΤ ΛΕ
 ΑΝΕΤΡ[ἦ ΤΜΗ]ΤΕ ΕΤΒΑΧḂ· ΚΑΤΑ
 ΕΙ[ΝΕ] (CΕΥΟΟΠ) ἦΤΟΝΟΜ(Α)CΙΑ
 ἦἦ[ΟΥ]ΤΕ ΜῪ ἦΑCΤΕΛΟC·
 Ο[ΥΧΟ]ΤΙ ΕΥΤΕΡΩΤΩ
 ΑΝΟΥΕ[ΡΗΥ] ΚΑΤΑ CΜΑΤ ΝΙΜ·
 Δ[Λ]ΛΑ] ΜΟΝΟΗ ΕΟΥΗ[Τ]ΕΥ
 [Ὺ]ΜΕΥ ἦΠΟΥΕΡCΑCΙΑ [Ε]ΗΑΝΟΥC·
 ῪΠΕCΩΩ[ΠΕ] ΑΤΡΕΠΟΥ(ΟΥ)ΩΥΕ
 ΘΩ[ΛΠ] ΔΒΑΛ·
 ΜῪCΩΤΕ ΔΡ ἦ[ΔΒΙ] ἦΚΡΤΟΛΜΑ
 ΑΤΡΕΚ[Ὺ]ΧΡΑCΘΑΙ ΜΠΗΑΒ[Ι· †]
 ΧΟΥ ΔΕ ΝΕΚ Ε[ΤΒΕ ΠΥΑ]ΜῪΤ
 ἦC[ΧΗΜΑ] ἦΤΕ ΤΨΥ[ΧΗ·
 ΠΜΑΡΩΑ]ΜῪΤ ἦ[CΧΗΜΑ
 ἦΤΨΥΧΗ] ΩΟΟΠ [...]·
 ΟΥCΦΑΙΡΙΚΟΗ ΠΕ ΕΦΟΥΗΡ ἦCΩC·
 ΖΙΤῪ ΝΕΤΕ ΟΥΗCΜΗ ῪΜΑΥ
 ἦΡΑΠΛΟΥΗ· ΕΕΕ· ΙΙΙ ΟΟΟ ΥΥΥ ΩΩΩ
 ΗΑ ΤCΜΗ CῪΤΕ ΝΕΥΩΟΠ
 ἦΡῪΔΕΙΜΕ· ΔΙ ΔΥ· [Ε]Ι ΕΥ· ΗΥ· ΟΥ·
 ΩΥ· ΟΙ ΗΙ· [Υ]Ι· ΩΙ· ΔΥΕΙ· ΕΥΗΥ· ΟΙΟΥ
 [CΤ]C· C· CΤC· CΤC· ΔΙΑΥ [ΕΙΕΥ]·
 ΗΥ· ΟΙΟΥ· ΩΥ· CΤC· [CΤC]·
 ΔΥΕΙΥ· ΟΙΟΥ· ΗΥ· [ἦ]CῪ ΠΥΑΜῪΤ
 ἦΠΟΥΨΥΧΗ ἦΡΑΥΤ
 ΠΜΑΡΩΑΜῪΤ ἦCΧΗΜΑ
 ΟΥCΦΑΙΡΙΚΟΗ [ΠΕ] ΠΜΑΡCΠΕΥ
 ἦCΧΗ[Μ]Α ΕΦΟΥΗΡ ἦCΩC ΟΥΗ[ΤΕ]
 C CΜΗ CῪΤΕ· ΤΨΥΧΗ [ἦ]ΡΑΥΤ
 ΠCΜΑΡΩΑΜῪΤ [ἦ]CΧΗΜΑ· ΖΙΤῪ

resemble each other, and they make some ordinary sounds of this sort: aeéoó. And from these (are made) the diphthongs.

So also the fourth and the fifth. With regard to them, they were not allowed to reveal the whole topic, but only those things that are apparent. You (pl.) were taught about them, that you should perceive them, in order that they, too, might all seek and find who they are, either by themselves alone [. . .], or by each other, or to reveal destinies that have been determined from the beginning, either with reference to themselves alone, or with reference to one another, just as they exist with each other in sound, whether partially or formally.

They are commanded to submit, for their part is generated and formal. (They are commanded) either by the long (vowels), or by those of dual time value, or by the short (vowels), which are small [. . .], or the oxytones, or the intermediates, or the barytones. And consonants exist with the vowels, and individually they are commanded and they submit.

ΝΕΤΕ ΟΥΝ[ΤΟΥ C]ΜΗ ΕΤΟΕΙ
 ἦϑΑΠΛΟΥΗ [ΔΑ]Δ· ΕΕΕ· ΗΗΗ· ΗΗ· ΟΟΟ·
 [Υ]ΥΥ· ΩΩΩ· ΩΩΩ· ΩΩΩ [ΔΥΩ]
 ΠΕΙΕΙCΧΗΜΑ ΨΒΒ{ι} [ΕΙΔΕΙΤ Δ]
 ΠΩΑΡΠ· CΕ[ΤῆΤΑΝ]Ὶ Δ Ε ΑΝΟΥΕ
 [ΡΗΥ ΔΥΩ CΕ]ΕΙΡΕ ἦϑῆ [CΜΗ
 ἄΠΡΟΧ]ΕΙΡΟΝ ἦ[ΤΕΕΙΡΕ· ΔΕΗ]ΩΥ·
 ΔΥΩ ΔΒΑΛ ϐΙΤΟΟΥΤΟΥ ἦΠΑ ΤCΜΗ
 CῆΤΕ·

ΤΕΕΙΡΕ ΔΗ ΠΜΑϐϐΤΑΥ ΔΥΩ
 ΠΜΑϐῚΟΥ· ΕΤΒΗΤΟΥ ἄΠΟΥΚΑΔΥ
 ΔΒΩΛΠ ΔΒΑΛ ἄΠΜΑ ΤΗ[ΡC] ΔΛΛΑ
 ΜΟΝΗ ΝΕΤΟΥΑ[Πϐ] ΔΒΑΛ
 ΔϐΟΥΤCΕΒΕ ΤΗ[Ε] ΔΡΑΥ
 ΑΤΡΕΤῆῤΗΟΕΙ [ἄ]ΜΑΥ ΞΕΚΑCΕ
 ϐΩΟΥ Ε[ΥΑ]ΨΗΜΕ ἦCΕΒΗΝΕ ΧΕ
 [ΠΜ]ΝΕ ΤΗΡΟΥ· Η ΔΒΑΛ [ϐΙΤΟ](Ο)
 ΤΟΥ ΟΥΔΕΕΤΟΥ ΟΥ[. . .]Η ΔΒΑΛ
 ϐΙΤῆ ΠΟΥΕΡ[ΗΥ] Η ΔΟΥΩΗϐ ΔΒΑΛ
 ἦϑῆΤ[ΔΨ] ΕΔΥΤΑΨΟΥ ΧΙΠ
 ἦΨΑΡ[Π] Η ΠΜΜΟΥ ΟΥΔΕΕΤ[ΟΥ· Η]
 Μῆ ΠΟΥΕΡΗΥ· ΟΙΟΝ [ΕΥ]ΨΟΟΠ Μῆ
 ΠΟΥΕΡΗ[Υ ϐῆ]ΟΥCΜΗ· ΕΙΤΕ ΚΑΤΑ
 Μ[Ε]ΡΟC ΕΙΤΕ ΚΑΤΑ ΕΙ[Ε]·

CΕ[ΟΥΑϐ CΑϐΝΕ ἄΜΑΥ
 [Δ]ῤϐΥΠΟΤΑCCE Η ΠΟΥ[ΜΕ]ΡΟC
 ϐΟΕΙ ἦΧΠΟ· ΔΥΩ [ΚΑ]ΤΑ ΕΙΜΕ· Η
 ϐΙΤῆ [ἄΜΑ]ΚΡΟΝ· Η ΔΒ[ΔΑΛ
 ϐΙΤΟΟΥΤΟΥ] ἦΠΑ ΠΧ[ΡΟΝΟC CΠΕΥ·
 Η] ΔΒΑΛ ϐΙΤῆ [ἦΒΡΑΧΥ Ε]ΤCΑΒΚ·
 ἦ[. . .] ΠΔ[. . .]Η ΝΕΤΧΑCΙ Η
 ΝΕΤϐῆΤΜΗΤΕ Η ΝΕΤΒΑΧΒ [Δ]ΥΩ

They constitute the nomenclature of the angels. And the consonants are self-existent, and as they are changed, <they> submit to the hidden gods by means of beat and pitch and silence and impulse. They summon the semivowels, all of which submit to them with one accord, since it is only the unchanging double (consonants) that coexist with the semivowels. But the aspirates and the inaspirates and the intermediates constitute the voiceless (consonants). Again [...] they are combined with each other, and they are separate from one another. They are commanded and they submit, and they constitute an ignorant nomenclature. And they become one or two or three or four or five or six, up to seven, having a simple sound, <together with> these which have two sounds, [...] the place of the seventeen consonants. Among the first names, some are less. And since these do not have being, either they are an aspect of being, or they divide the nature of the mind, which is masculine, (and) which is intermediate.

(ἦ)ϸΥΜΦΩΝΟΝ ΣΕΨΟΟΠ Μἦ ΠΕΤΕ
 ΟΥΝ[Τ]ΟΥ ΣΜΗ· ΔΥΩ ΚΑΤΑ ΜΕ[Ρ]
 ΟΣ ΣΕΟΥ[Δ]ϸ ΖΑΡΝΕ ΠΕΥ [Δ]ΥΩ
 ΣΕΖΥΠΟΤΑΣΣΕ· [ϸ]ΕΨΟΟΠ ἦ(Τ)
 ΟΝΟΜΑΣΙΑ [ἦ]ἦΔΣΤΕΛΟC· ΔΥΩ
 [ἦϸ]ΥΜΦΩΝΟΝ ΣΕΨΟ[ΟΠ ϸ]ΔΡΙ
 ΖΑΡΑΥ ΟΥΑΕΕΤΟΥ [ΔΥ]Ω ΕΥΨῶΒ
 {ι}ΕΙΔΕΙΤ {ϸῤ} [ϸΥ]ΠΟΤΑΣΣΕ ΔΥΩ}
 (σε)ῤϸΥ[Π]ΟΤΑΣΣΕ ἦἦΝΟΥΤΕ
 [Ε]ΘΗΠ· ΔΒΔΛ ϸΙΤΟΟΤῤ ἦ[ἦΟ]
 ΥΨΒΔΔΘΕ Μἦ ΟΥ[Μ]ἦΤΟΥΑΖΕΙΗΤ·
 Μἦ ΟΥ[Κ]ΔΡΩC Μἦ
 ΟΥΖΟΡΜΗ·[ΣΕῤ]ΚΑΛΕΙ ἦΝΑ ΤΠΕΨΕ
 ἦ[ΣΜ]Η· ΠΕΕΙ ΤΗΡΟΥ ΣΕῤ [ϸΥΠΟ]
 ΤΑΣΣΕ ἦΜΑΥ ἦΝΟΥ[ΣΜ]Η ΠΟΥΩΤ·
 ΟΙΟΝ ΜΟ[ΠΟ]Ν ΠΕΤΚΗΒ ἦΑΤΨ[ΒΕ
 ΕΥ]ΨΟΟΠ ϸΝ ΠΑ ΤΠΕ[ΨΕ ἦΣΜ]Η·
 ἦΔΑCΥ ΔΕ [Μἦ ἦΨΙΛ]ΟΝ Μἦ ΠΕ
 [Τῤ]ἦ ΤΜΗΤΕ ΣΕ[ΨΟΟΠ [ἦΠΕΤΕ
 ΜἦΤ]ΟΥ ΣΜΗ· ΠΑ[ΖΗΝ . . . ΣΕ]
 ΒΛῆΛΔΜἦΤ [Μἦ ΠΟΥΕΡΗΥ· ΔΥ]Ω
 ΣΕΠΑΡΧΑΠΟΥΕΡΗ[Υ] ΣΕΟΥΕΖ
 ΖΑΡΝΕ ΧΕ ἦΜΑΥ ΔΥΩ
 ΣΕΖΥΠΟΤΑΣΣΕ· ΕΥΨΟΟΠ ΔΕ
 [ἦ]ΟΝΟΜΑΣΙΑ ἦΑΤCΑΥΝΕ ΣΕΨΩΠΕ
 ΔΕ ΠΟΥΕΕΙ Η ΣΠΕΥ Η ΨΔΜἦΤ· Η
 ϸ[ΤΑΥ] Η †ΟΥ· Η [ϸ]ΔΥ ΨΔΖΡΗῖ
 [Δ]CΑΨῤ ΕΟΥΝΤΟΥ ΣΜΗ [ἦ][ϸΔΠ]
 ΖΟΥΝ (Μἦ) ΠΕΕΙ ΕΤΕ ΟΥ[ΠΤΟΥCΜ]Η
 CἦΤ[Ε] ἦ· ΠΜΔ [ΜἦΠΜἦΤ]CΑΨC Ε
 [ΤῤCΥ]ΜΦ[ΩΝΗ· ϸἦ] ἦΨΑΡἦ ἦΡΕΝ
 ϸἦ[ϸΔΕΙ] ΠΕ· ΣΕ[ΔΧ]ῤ· ΔΥΩ Η[ΕΕΙ]

And you (sg.) put in those that resemble each other with the vowels and the consonants. Some are: bagadazatha, begedezethe, bEgEdEzEthE, bigidizithi, bogodozotho, buguduzuthu, bOgOdOzOthO. And the rest [. . .] babebEbibobubO. But the rest are different: abebEbibob, in order that you (sg.) might collect them, and be separated from the angels.¹¹

ρωc εμ[π̄]τοϽ οϽcia [μ̄μ]εϽ η
 ε[Ͻο]ει π̄ειμε [π̄τ]οϽcia [η]
 εϽπωρ[χ̄ λ]τϽϽcic [μ̄]π̄νοϽϽ
 [τ̄η ε]τε θ̄αϽ[τ̄ τε] ετ̄ρ̄π̄
 τ̄μ[ητε] λϽω εκ̄ε[ι]ηε λ̄ροϽη
 [π̄]ηε†ηε π̄νοϽερ[ηϽ μ̄π̄]
 ηετε οϽητοϽ cμ̄η [μ̄π̄]
 ηετ̄ρ̄cγμ̄φωμ̄ ρ̄π̄[ρ̄α]ειμε μ̄ει·
 β̄λ̄Ͻλ̄λ̄[λ̄]ζ̄[λ̄θ̄λ̄] β̄εϽε̄λ̄ε̄ζ̄[ε]θ̄ε̄
 [β̄ηϽηλ̄η] ζ̄ηθ̄η· β̄[τ̄Ͻτ̄λ̄τ̄ζ̄τ̄θ̄τ̄
 β̄οϽο] λ̄οζ̄οθ̄ο [β̄ϽϽϽλ̄ϽϽϽϽϽ]
 β̄ωϽω̄λ̄ω̄[ζ̄ω̄θ̄ω̄ λϽω] π̄κεce
 [επε]β̄λ̄[β̄εβ̄ηβ̄ιβ̄οβ̄Ͻβ̄ω̄·]
 π̄κεceεπε λ̄ε εϽωοο ρ̄π̄
 οϽωβ̄β̄ιε· β̄εβ̄ηβ̄ι[β̄]οβ̄ χ̄εκαce
 εκ̄ηαcαϽ[ρ̄]οϽ· λϽω ηκ̄πωρ̄χ̄ λ̄π̄
 [λ̄]ϽϽελ̄οc.

Just as there is a strict rank in the heavenly world, the letters of the alphabet and the different sounds humans emit when referencing them are arranged in a strictly hierarchical way. The secrets of the vowels contain the language of the gods and the angels. Thus, the world and the nature of the angels is understood to correspond to the letters of the alphabet and their sounds in different combinations. Some are single and individual, others are joined to one another, likened to vowels with one single tone and consonants that are made up of more than one sound. Information about the complex systems of vowels, consonants, tones and shapes is intermixed throughout the above passage with paraenetic sections calling for righteous behaviour and study, so that readers might gain insights into the

¹¹ NHC X, 25:21–32:5. Text and trans. Pearson, in *Nag Hammadi Codices X and IX*, ed. Pearson, 293–309.

secrets of how to separate themselves from the beings occupying the different levels on the way up towards heaven. As in the case of *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, the vowels seem to be used as a mind map of how humans are to relate to the divine, thereby gaining assistance in accessing salvation.

What is interesting to note in the passage above is the mention of the central role played by the number seven in relation to vowels and letters. This is a common trope in ancient letter speculation and vowel magic. In the writings of Philo of Alexandria, for example, we find many lengthy expositions on the secret and knowledge-giving merits of letters and numbers, in particular the number seven, the most powerful of numbers.¹² Philo was greatly inspired by predecessors such as Plato and the Pythagoreans who viewed numbers as carrying secret and divine information; numbers were associated with the higher realm, while at the same time they were things in themselves. Indeed, the cosmos was imbued with the structure of numbers.¹³ There were seven vowels, seven musical tones and seven planets. Everything was clearly structured. Xenocrates, Eudorus and Plutarch's teacher Ammonius are also said to have been fond of numerology.¹⁴ Tiberius' court philosopher, Trasullus, was devoted to Pythagoras and wrote a now lost work entitled *On the Seven Musical Tones*.¹⁵ The secrets of music and language were intimately associated with the number seven. This view of the symbolic power of the Septuagint was also adopted by the Romans

¹² See especially Philo, *On the Creation. Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3*, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library (London: Harvard University Press, 1929).

¹³ Plato, *The Republic*, 531; John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 BC to 220* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 11; Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 31ff.

¹⁴ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 16–17, 29–30, 127–131, 184, 190; Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 320ff.

¹⁵ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 184ff.

and coincided with a renaissance of Pythagorean philosophy in Rome and Alexandria in the first century BCE and after the beginning of the common era. Clement tells us that Hermippus wrote a book entitled *On the Number Seven*,¹⁶ and Marcus Varro also wrote a now lost work dedicated to the secrets of the number seven, called *Hebdomades*.¹⁷ Porphyry tells of a certain Pythagorean Moderatus of Gades and his speculations on the nature of numbers: all numbers were plurals born of the Monad (one of what appear to be three primordial pairs in this system), which then return to the Monad. This was a clear formulation of an idea about birth and return, and the numbers were considered by many to have a redemptive power; by contemplating their nature, one could also redeem the *nous* stuck in the body like the unity that became the plural through emanations from the Monad.

The vowels and tones were seven in total, a fact which Origen also recognised. Along with Philo, he contended that God did not rest on the seventh day of creation, but that this day – through its connection to the power of the number seven – was a day for contemplation, reflection and spiritual activity. Like Philo, Origen argued that it was unthinkable that God rested on the seventh day;¹⁸ rather, he was active in another way, in transcendent spiritual activity.¹⁹ Thus, the seventh day was especially auspicious for contemplation and spiritual pursuits,²⁰ such as the explorations deliberated upon in the above passage from *Marsanes*.

The Trimorphic Protennoia (*NHC XIII,1*)

This text is found in what has been termed ‘Codex XIII’, eight leaves found in the cover binding of Codex VI. These sixteen pages consist

¹⁶ Clement, *Stromata* VI, 16.

¹⁷ Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* III, 10.

¹⁸ According to Eusebius, *Preparations* 13:12.

¹⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsus* VI, 61; *Peri Archon* II, 9:1

²⁰ Origen, *Commentary to the Gospel of Matthew* XII, 36.

of the text titled, *The Trimorphic Protennoia* (the three forms of the first thought), and the first page of *On the Origin of the World*, the opening of which is found on the last page of *The Trimorphic Protennoia*.²¹ As with the two texts discussed hitherto, this is a Sethian tractate and, like *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, it shows some Christian influence. The text is divided into three separate parts, retelling three instances of descent by the saviour figure Protennoia (God's 'first thought'), identified with Barbelo. This is comparable with the ending of the longer version of *The Apocryphon of John*, which contains a hymn to Pronoia who descends three times (NHC II, 30:11–31:25). The three descents in *The Trimorphic Protennoia* are related to the sphere of sound and speech. In the first descent Protennoia is called the voice of the highest god who steps down in materiality to unveil the mysteries of God to the worthy. During the second descent Protennoia reveals yet another part of the mystery, this time as the speech of the highest God's voice. The final mysteries are revealed in the third descent, when Protennoia is described as the word of the speech of the highest God's voice. This frame highlights the importance placed on the nature and practice of vowel magic. The threefold descent of Protennoia first releases humans from sleep caused by the body, then Fate's grasp is lifted and, finally, the mystery called 'the five seals' is provided. A ritual called 'five seals', together with a baptism, is also mentioned in *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, and in *The Apocryphon of John*.²² As in other Sethian tractates, the highest God is described as a great invisible spirit who takes the three forms of

²¹ John D. Turner, 'Introduction to Codex XIII', in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, ed. C. W. Hedrick (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 360–369. *On the Origin of the World* is preserved in its entirety in Codex II.

²² For a discussion of 'the five seals' ritual and a comparison between the three different Sethian texts in the Nag Hammadi collection that mention it, see Alastair Logan, 'The Mystery of the Five Seals: Gnostic Initiation Reconsidered', *Vigiliae Christianae* 51:2 (1997): 188–206; see also Christian Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus: The Egyptian Priestly Figure as a Teacher of Hellenized Wisdom* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

a Father, Mother and Son. Protennoia is a manifestation of these three aspects.

The following quote from the first part of the text illustrates the place of magical vowel features in this text, and its ritualistic context, here read as part of the first descent undertaken by Protennoia:

Now the Voice that originated from my Thought exists as three permanences: the Father, the Mother, the Son. Existing perceptibly as Speech, it (Voice) has within it a Word endowed with every <glory>, and it has three masculinities, three powers, and three names. They exist in the manner of Three □□□ which are quadrangles, secretly within a silence of the Ineffable One.

It is he alone who came to be, that is, the Christ. And, as for me, I anointed him as the glory of the Invisible Spirit, with goodness. Now the Three, I established alone in eternal glory over the Aeons in the Living Water, that is, the glory that surrounds him who first came forth to the Light of those exalted Aeons, and it is in glorious Light that he firmly perseveres. And he stood in his own Light that

ΠΟΥΟΕΙΝΕ ΠΡΩΡΑΥ ΠΛΕ ΕΠΤΑϞΥΩΠΕ
 ΕΒΟΛ ΖΜ ΠΑΜΕΕΥΕ ΕϞΥΩΟΠ
 ΠΥΩΜΤΕ ΜΜΟΗ ΠΩΤ ΤΜΑΛΥ
 ΠΥΗΡΕ ΟΥΣΜΗ ΕϞΥΩΟΠ ΖΠ
 ΟΥΑΙΣΘΗCΙC ΟΥΠΤΕϞ ΜΜΑΥ
 ΠΟΥΛΟΣΤΟC ΖΡΑΪ ΠΖΗΤϞ ΠΑΪ
 ΕΤΕΥΠΤΑϞ ΜΜΑΥ Π[ΟΥΕ](Ε)ΟΟΥ
 ΝΜ ΔΥΩ ΟΥΠΤΕϞ ΜΜΑΥ
 ΠΥΩΜΤΕ ΜΜΗΤΖΟΥΤ· ΔΥΩ
 ΥΩΜΤΕ ΠΔΥΗΔΙC ΔΥΩ ΥΩΜΤ
 ΠΡΑΗ ΕΥΩΟΠ ΜΠΕ ΕΙΡΗΤΕ
 ΜΠΥΑΜΤ □□□ ΕΥΟ ΠϞϞΟΥ ΚΟΟΖ
 ΖΠ ΟΥΠΕΤΖΗΠ ΖΡΑ[Ι Ζ]Π
 ΟΥΜΠΤΚΑΡΩC ΜΠΑΤΥΑΧΕ
 ΜΜ[ΟϞ
 ΠΤΟϞ Ο]ΥΑΔΤϞ ΕΤΑΖΥΩΠΕ ΕΤΕ
 ΠΑΕΙ [ΠΕ ΠΕΧ̄C ΔΥΩ] ΔΠΟΚ
 ΠΤΑΪΤΑΖ̄C̄ ΜΠΕΟΥ [ΠΤΕ ΠΠΠΑ
 ΠΔ]ΤΗΔΥ ΕΡΟϞ ΖΠ ΟΥΜΠΤ[Χ̄C̄
 ΠΥΩ]ΜΤ ΒΕ ΔΕΙΤΕΡΟϞ ΕΡΑΤϞ
 ΟΥΔ[ΔΤϞ ΖΠ ΟΥΕΟΥ Π]ΥΔΕΠΕΖ
 ΕΖΡΑΪ ΕΧ[Π ΠΑΙΩΗ ΖΡΑΪ ΖΜ
 ΠΜΟΥ] ΕΤΟΠΖ ΕΤΕ ΠΑΪ [ΠΕ
 ΠΕΟΥ ΠΑΪ ΕΤΚΩΤΕ ΕΡΟ]Ϟ ΠΑΪ
 ΕΠΤ[Δ]ϞΡ̄ΥΟΥΡ̄Π ΜΠΡ̄ΠΕ ΜΠΟΥΟΕΙΝ

surrounds him, that is, the Eye of the Light that gloriously shines on me. He perpetuated the Father of all Aeons, who am I, the Thought of the Father, Protennoia, that is, Barbelo, the perfect Glory, and the immeasurable Invisible One who is hidden. I am the Image of the Invisible Spirit, and it is through me that the All took shape, and (I am) the Mother (as well as) the Light which she appointed as Virgin, she who is called 'Meirothea', the incomprehensible Womb, the unrestrainable and immeasurable Voice.

Then the Perfect Son revealed himself to his Aeons, who originated through him, and he revealed them and glorified them, and gave them thrones, and stood in the glory with which he glorified himself. They blessed the Perfect Son, the Christ, the only-begotten God. And they gave glory, saying, "He is! He is! The Son of God! The Son of God! It is he who is! The Aeon of Aeons, beholding the Aeons which he begot. For thou hast begotten by thine own desire! Therefore we glorify thee: ma mó ó ó eia ei on

ἡνιαιων ετχοσε δγω θραϊ θῆ
 ογοειν ἡεοογ θῆ ογταχ[ρ]ο
 εϋμην εβολ δγω δ[ε]ωζε ερατῆ
 θῆ πφογοειν ἡμην ἡμο[ε] παῖ
 ετκωτε εροϋ ετε παῖ πε ββαλ ἡπ
 [ογ]οειν ετῖρογοειν εροει θραϊ θῆ
 ογεοο[γ] δϋτῆ δλων ἡπιωτ ἡ(η)
 δλων τηρογ ετε [δ]ηοκ πε
 πμееεε ἡπιωτ ἡτπρωτεπνοια
 ετε παῖ πε βαρβηλω πεοογ ετχ
 [ηκ] εβολ δγω πατῆδγ εροϋ
 εϋθμητῆ ἡδτω[ιτϋ] δηοκ πε θικων
 ἡππῆδ ἡδτῆδγ ερο[ε] δγω
 ἡταπτηρϋ χι θικων εβολ θῖτοοτ
 δγω τμαδγ πογοειμε παῖ
 εντακδαδϋ εϋοει ἡπαρθεις
 τδῖ ετογμoyт [ε] ερος χε
 ἡεῖτῖροθεδ τοτε ἡτατεπος
 πθρ[ο]ογ ἡατεμαδτε ἡμοϋ
 δγω ἡδτωιτῆ
 τοτε πετελειος ἡγῃρε δϋγονθϋ
 εβολ ἡνεϋ δλων παῖ ενταγωπε
 εβολ θῖτοοτϋ δϋγονθου εβολ
 δϋτῆ δγ ἡογεοογ δγω δϋτῆ δγ
 ἡρεπθροнос δϋωζε ερατῆ θῆ
 πεοογ παῖ εταδϋτῆ εοογ δγ θραῖ
 ἡθμητϋ δγμογ απτελιος ἡγῃρε
 πεχῶ ππoyтe παῖ ενταδγωπε
 ογαδτϋ δγω δϋτῆ εοογ εγχω
 ἡμοс χε ϋωοοπ ϋωοοπ πγῃρε
 ἡππoyтe πγῃρε ἡππoyтe ἡτοϋ
 πε[τ]ωοοπ παλων ἡτε δλων

ei! The Aeon of Aeons! The Aeon which he gave!”

Then, moreover, the God who was begotten gave them (the Aeons) a power of life on which they might rely, and he established them. The first Aeon he established over the first: Armédón, Nousanios, Armozel; the second he established over the second Aeon: Phaionios, Ainius, Oroiael; the third over the third Aeon: Mellephaneus, Loios, Daveithai; the fourth over the fourth: Mousanios, Amethes, Éléléth. Now those Aeons were begotten by the God who was begotten – the Christ – and these Aeons received as well as gave glory.²³

εϕδλωτ ανα[ι]ωνη παει
 ενταϑιχοοϑυ γε ητοκ ησαρ α[κ]
 χπο ρμ̄ πεκοϑωϑε οϑαατκ ετβε
 παι τ[η] ϑ̄ εροϑυ πακ· μ̄ᾱ μ̄ω̄ ω̄ ω̄
 ω̄ ετ̄ᾱ ετ̄ οη̄ ετ̄ π[ιαι]ωνη ητε
 ηα[ι]ωνη π[α]ιωνη ηταϑιταιϑ
 τοτε ητοϑ πνο[υτε ενταϑ]
 χποϑ αϑϑ̄ ηαϑ ηοϑδομ̄ η[ω]νηϑ
 ετρεϑταχ]ρο εροϑ αϑω
 α[ϑ]τεϑο μ̄μ̄[οοϑ ρμ̄ ποϑμα
 π]ω[ο]ρπ̄ μεη ηαιων αϑτεϑο[ϑ]
 εϑραῑ εχμ̄ πϑω]ρπ̄· αρ̄μ̄η̄λ̄ω̄η̄
 ηο̄ϑ̄ϑ̄ᾱ[ηιον αρ̄μ̄οϑηλ̄ πμαϑ]
 σηαϑ αϑτεϑοϑ [εϑραῑ εχμ̄
 πμαϑσηαϑ ηαιων] φ̄ᾱτ̄οη̄τ̄οη̄
 ᾱῑη̄τ̄οη̄ ο̄ρ̄ο̄τ̄ᾱη̄λ̄ πμαϑϑομ̄τ̄
 εϑραῑ εχμ̄ πμαϑϑομ̄τ̄ ηαιων
 μ̄ε̄λ̄λ̄ε̄φ̄ᾱη̄ε̄ᾱ· λ̄ω̄ῑ ο̄η̄ λ̄ᾱϑ̄ε̄ῑθ̄ᾱῑ
 πμεϑϑτοοϑ εϑραῑ εχμ̄
 πμεϑϑτοοϑ μ̄ο̄ϑ̄ϑ̄ᾱη̄οη̄ αμ̄εθ̄ηη
 ηλ̄η̄λ̄η̄θ̄ ηαιων θε ενταϑιχοοϑ
 εβολ ϑιτοοτ̄ϑ̄ μ̄πνοϑτε
 ηταϑιχοϑ πεϑ̄ϑ̄ ηαῑ δε αϑϑ̄ ηαϑ
 ηοϑεοοϑ αϑω αϑϑ̄ εοοϑ ϑωοϑ.

This passage has clear Christian traces as major parts of it centre around the powers of a heavenly Christ figure. First, Protennoia establishes her position as a manifestation of the highest god in the world, the invisible spirit. Then we get some background information concerning the structure of the heavens, a sort of protology. The heavens are populated by a score of aeonic beings created by

²³ NHC XIII, 37:20–39:8. Text and trans. Turner, in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, ed. Hedrick, 407–411.

Christ, who then reveals himself to them. They in turn give praise to Christ as a representative of the highest God in heaven, and there follows a passage describing the order among the Aeons in the heavens. The magical vowel features of this text are placed in the context of the aeons praising Christ, and just as in *Marsanes* and *The Great Indivisible Spirit*, the vowels seem to be associated with the structure of the heavens and provide humans with an opportunity to take part in the exchange being conducted in heaven. For this to be made possible, one must first distinguish between human words and sound in the cosmos, and the language attached to God; the text makes this clear by linking the different levels of sound to the downward evolution ultimately resulting in the material existence of humans. For humans to reach God, their languages must be made into a voice and the divine voice must be made into words. A similar passage alluding to these views on the relation between letters, sounds and words is found in the poetic tractate, *Thunder: Perfect Mind*, in Codex VI.²⁴

A curious material feature in *The Trimorphic Protennoia* which has gone unnoticed – probably due to its being left out of transcribed modern editions – concerns the three squares that appear at the beginning of the text (see Fig. 5.3). The scribe has drawn three quadrangles in association with the discussion of the three parts of the highest God and the tripartite distinction between divine sounds, a voice audible to humans and words which make it understandable. These quadrangles reside, we read above, ‘secretly within a silence of the Ineffable One’. The three squares, given that the ineffability of God is mentioned in connection to them, could refer to the mathematical proof that there was an inborn

²⁴ NHC VI, 20:26–35 reads: ‘Hear me, you hearers; and learn of my words, you who know me. I am the hearing that is attainable to everything; I am the speech that cannot be grasped. I am the name of the sound, and the sound of the name. I am the sign of the letter.’ Text and trans. George W. MacRae, in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2–5 and VI,1: With Papyrus Berlinensis 8502, 1 and 4*, ed. Douglas M. Parrott (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 251.

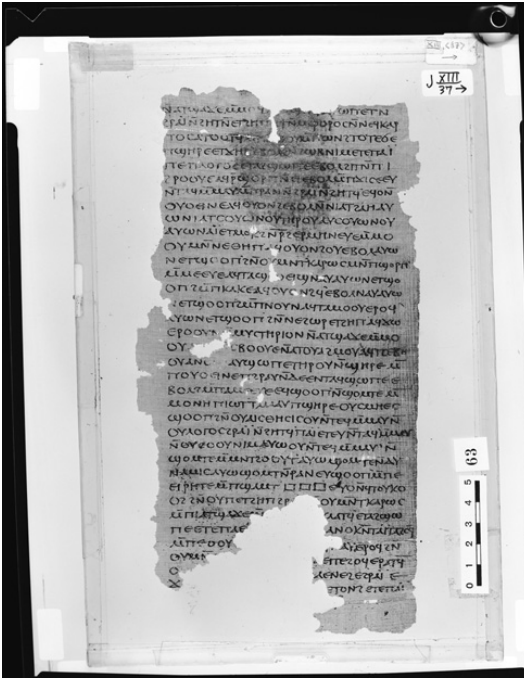


Figure 5.3 Page 37 of *The Trimorphic Protennoia*, Codex XIII. Photo by Basile Psiroukis. Image courtesy of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Records, Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

transcendence, infinity if you will, built into the structure of the cosmic system. Three squares can be placed edgewise to each other to symbolise a right-sided triangle (see Fig. 5.4). With the aid of the Pythagorean theorem regarding the nature of right-sided triangles,²⁵ one could effectively illustrate the existence of irrational numbers: numbers that cannot be expressed as the ratio of two whole numbers (an example is π). Irrational numbers contain an aspect of infinity, since in their decimal form, they consisted

²⁵ The longest side of a right-sided triangle, squared, is always equal to the sum of the two shorter sides squared.

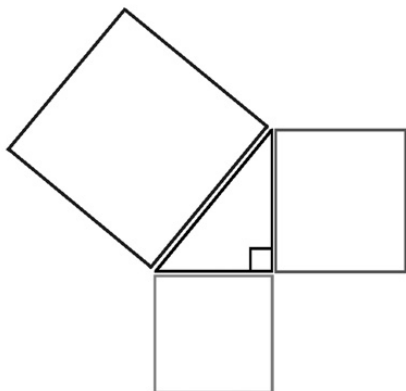


Figure 5.4 Right-sided triangle surrounded by three squares. Image by author.

of an infinite number of decimals ($1/3$ for example is $0.333 \dots$). This, Plato tells us, had been demonstrated by Theodorus of Cyrene (465–398 BCE).²⁶

The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth (*NHC VI,6*)

This text is without title but has been termed ‘the discourse on the eighth and ninth’ since the major topic of the text is the nature of, and road towards the eighth (Ogdoad) and ninth (Ennead) levels of existence, representing the highest heavens. This text belongs to the tradition associated with the mythical prophet Hermes Trismegistus. It is one of three Hermetic texts in the Nag Hammadi collection, the other two being *Prayer of Thanksgiving* and the fragment of Asclepius, all contained within Codex VI.

The text begins as a dialogue between a teacher and his pupil. Three pages into the text the narrative changes to a hymn to, and a dialogue with the highest God in the heavenly world. *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* is mainly made up of an outline of how initiates first enter the eighth sphere by recognising their

²⁶ Plato, *Theaetetus* 147D.

unity with the all-encompassing mind (*nous*), and then the ninth sphere by becoming one with the mind of the All (God). Then follows the singing of hymns of praise to God, and finally the pupil is told how to preserve and pass on the knowledge contained in the work. In the following two passages, the first is a prayer directed to God for granting the salvific vision needed to traverse the spheres:

He created everything. He who is self-contained cares for everything. He is perfect, the invisible God to whom one speaks in silence – his image is moved when it is directed, and it governs – the one mighty power, who is exalted above majesty, who is better than the honored (ones), Zoxathazo a óó éé óóó ééé óóó ó éé óóóóóó óóóóóó óóóóóó óóóóóó óóóóóó óóóóóó. Zazazoth Lord, grant us a wisdom from your power that reaches us, so that we may describe to ourselves the vision of the eighth and the ninth.²⁷

ΔΥΩΩΗΤ̄ ἦΚΑ ΝΙΜ̄ ΠΕΤΕ ΟΥἸΤΑϞ
 ΟΥΑΔϞ ΘΡΑΪ ἦΘΗΤϞ̄· ΕϞ ϞΙΘΑ ΟΥΟΝ
 ΝΙΜ̄ ΕϞΜΕΘ̄ ΠΠΟΥΤΕ ἦΔΘΟΡΑΤΟΣ
 ΕΤΟΥΨΑΧΕ ΕΡΟϞ ΘἸ ΟΥΚΑΡΩϞ
 ΣΕΚΙΜ̄ ΕΤΕϞ{Θ̄}ΚΩΗ ΕΥἸΛΟΙΚΕΙ
 Μ̄ΜΟΣ ΔΥΩ C{Ε}ἸΛΟΙΚΕΙ ΠΧΩΩΡΕ
 ἦΤΛΥΝΑΜΙC ΠΕΤΧΟCΕΑ
 ΤΜἸΤΠΟΒ̄ ΠΕΤCΟΤἸ ΔΗ ΤΔΕΙΘ̄
 ΖΩΞΔΘΔΖΩ Δ ΩΩ ΕΕ ΩΩΩ ΗΗΗ
 ΩΩΩ Ω ΗΗ ΩΩΩΩΩΩ ΩΩΩΩ
 ΩΩΩΩΩΩ ὐὐὐὐὐ
 ΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩ
 ΖΩΞΔΖΩΘ̄ ΠΧΟΙC ΜΔ† ΠΑΗ
 ἦΠΟΥCΟΦΙΑ ΕΒΟΔ ΘἸ ΤΕΚΛΥΝΑΜΙC
 ΕΤΠΗΘ ΨΑΡΟΝ ΕΤΡΕΝΧΩ ΠΑΗ
 ἦΘΕΩΡΙΑ ἦΘCΓΛΟΑC ΜἸ ΘΕΠΠΑC·

The second passage containing vowels appears five pages later, in a hymn sung in praise to God for receiving salvation:

After these things, I give thanks by singing a hymn to you. 'For I have received life from you,

ὦ ΠΘΜΟΤ [Μ]ἦἦCΑ ΝΔΪ· †ΨἸ
 ΘΜΟΤ [ΕΕΙ]ἸἸΘΥΜΝΕΙ ΕΡΟΚ·
 ἦΤΔΕΙΧ[Ι] ΠΩΗΘ̄ ΓΑΡ ἦΤΟΟΤΚ̄·

²⁷ VI, 56:8–26. Text and trans. James Brashler, Peter A. Dirkse and Douglas M. Parrott, in *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI, 1*, ed. Parrott, 355–357.

when you made me wise. I praise you. I call your name that is hidden within me: a óó éé óóó ééé óóó ó éé óóóóóó óóóóóó óóóóóó yyyyyy óóóóóóóóóóóóóó you are the one who exists with the spirit. I sing a hymn to you reverently.’ O my son, write this book for the temple at Diospolis in hieroglyphic characters, entitling it ‘The Eighth Reveals the Ninth.’²⁸

ἡΤΑΡΕΚΑΔΤ ἡσοφος· †μεον
 εροκ †μεοντε ἡπεκραν εΤρηπ
 ρραῖ ἡρημτ λ ὠ εε ὠ ἡηη ὠὠὠ
 ἡἡἡ ὠὠὠὠ ὠὠὠὠ ὠὠὠὠὠ
 ἡἡἡἡἡ ὠὠὠὠὠὠὠὠὠὠὠ
 ὠὠὠὠὠὠὠὠὠὠὠ ἡτοκ πε
 πετϷοοπ ἡἡ ἡἡἡ †ρηρἡἡἡ
 εροκ ρἡ οἡἡἡἡτ ποἡτε ω
 παϷἡρε πειριϷἡεσαρῆ ἡπερπε
 ἡἡιοσπολις· ρἡ ρερεραῖ ἡσαρ
 πραν ὡεκροποἡαζε εθοστἡοαο
 οἡἡἡῆ εβολ ἡθηἡἡαο

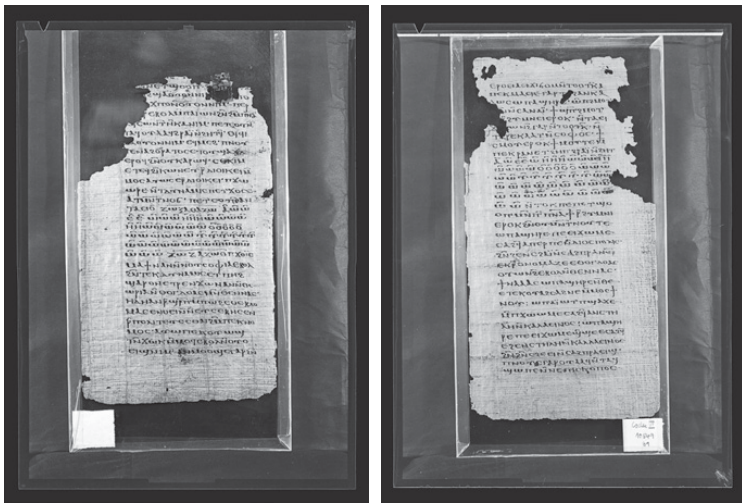


Figure 5.5 Pages 56 and 61 of *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, Codex VI. Photo by James M. Robinson. Images courtesy of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Records, Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

²⁸ VI, 61:3–22. Text and trans. by Brashler et al., in *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI, 1*, ed. Parrott, 366–369.

Here the two instances of vowel recitation occur in different contexts, as a prayer and as a hymn of thanksgiving. In *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, the vowels do not sync with the structures of the heavens, as in the Sethian tractates. This is not surprising considering that materiality has a different standing in this Hermetic text, which echoes a Stoic notion that materiality is all there is (granted, in both much finer and rougher constellations). Here the vowels are associated with the hidden structure of the cosmos and the seven spheres which make up the cosmos, as well as with the seven planets and the archons guarding them. This is the underlying law of all existence, ultimately a manifestation of the highest divine principle. By tapping into this structure, the initiate shows awareness of the hidden knowledge required to be let through the spheres and to open up communication with the God above and assure personal ascent after death. The text ends with the initiate promising to preserve and safeguard the knowledge of the Hermetic tradition and pass it on. References are made to an Egyptian context – hieroglyphs, Egyptian gods and temples are mentioned – revealing either a common antique appropriation of Egyptian culture due to its being imbued with mystic knowledge or, as Bull has argued, an actual Egyptian priestly context for the text.²⁹

Contextualising Magical Vowel Features

Previous studies have bestowed ample attention on the individual Sethian and Hermetic contexts of these magical vowel passages, both of which are based on Graeco-Egyptian traditions much older than the texts themselves.³⁰ I shall not here attempt to give

²⁹ The latter is the argument put forward in Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus*.

³⁰ John D. Turner, 'From Baptismal Vision to Mystical Union with the One: The Case of the Sethian Gnostics', in *Practicing Gnosis: Ritual, Magic, Theurgy and Liturgy in Nag Hammadi, Manichaean and Other Ancient Literature. Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson*, ed. A. D. DeConick, G. Shaw and J. D. Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 411–431;

a complete conceptual background of what went into the art of vowel magic, merely mentioning the main ideas needed to facilitate the following discussion on their place within the Nag Hammadi collection as a whole, as well as within a monastic setting.

Any discussion of vowel magic should take its departure from ancient views concerning the close intermingling of physics, medicine and theory of mind, that is, the way cognition and emotions were thought to work. As Hans Dieter Betz writes, the practice of magic was closely linked to local and everyday use. People referenced magical words and formulas, and experts touted knowledge of them, for very practical reasons: to improve life here and now, to solve the problems everyone faces in terms of love, health, finances and politics.³¹ In the PGM we have many examples of this, where spells consisting of holy names and constellations of vowels are used for everything from improving one's memory³² or vision,³³ to love spells,³⁴ enticing dreams³⁵ and attracting a particular person to one's side.³⁶ The art of vowel magic, also clearly represented in the PGM, had a second more transcendent function in that it was a way to establish communication with the gods for spiritual edification.³⁷ This is what we find in the Nag Hammadi texts.

Ian Gardner, 'The Sethian Context to a Coptic Handbook of Ritual Power (= P. Macquarie I)', in *Proceedings of the 27th International Congress of Papyrology*, ed. T. Derda, A. Łajtar and J. Urbanik (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2016), 755–766; Malcolm Choat, 'Gnostic Elements in Ancient Magical Papyri', in *The Gnostic World*, ed. G. W. Trompf, G. B. Mikkelsen and J. Johnston (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 217–224; Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God*, passim; Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus*, 331–368.

³¹ *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, vol. I: *Texts*, ed. and trans. Hans Dieter Betz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xlv–xlviii.

³² PGM III, 467–478.

³³ PGM IV, 930–1114.

³⁴ PGM XXXVI, 361–371.

³⁵ PGM XII, 107–21.

³⁶ PGM CVIII, 1–12.

³⁷ See, for example, PGM XIII, 343–646.

Vowels are used as means to give praise to and facilitate the soul's contact and ultimate unity with the divine. The term 'magic' should not confuse us when discussing vowel magic, and we should at the outset rid ourselves of any pejorative connotations attached to the practice as 'proper' religion's degenerate sidekick. The practice of seeking knowledge and indeed power in the art of sounds, letters and numbers – in both the more practical and the theological aspects of vowel magic – was firmly established in a systematic and an ancient scientific approach to the world. But the Nag Hammadi codices consist mostly of Christian texts, produced and owned by Christians. As I have mentioned, and as becomes clear from the images provided here of the texts, the vowel constellations are not highlighted as one might expect if they were used in a ritual setting. So, how and why would the Christian owners of the Nag Hammadi texts read these representations of ancient vowel magic? Before tackling these questions, it is worthwhile surveying Christian views of holy words, letters and sounds, which are addressed in the following section.

Christian Use of 'Pagan' Techniques of Holy Letters and Sounds

Paul refers to an ability to speak a special language which directly communicates with God. These are 'unintelligible sounds' (στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις), gifts of the spirit which put humans in contact with God (Rom 8:26). In 1 Corinthians, Paul distinguishes between the speech of men and angels (1 Cor 13–15), and claims that the speech of the spirit is only grasped by God: 'no one understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit' (οὐδεὶς γὰρ ἀκούει, πνεύματι δὲ λαλεῖ μυστήρια) (1 Cor 14:2). Further on in the same letter, Paul differentiates between ordinary human wisdom and spiritual teaching, which is 'not taught by human wisdom but

taught by the Spirit' (οὐκ ἐν διδασκατοῖς ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας λόγοις ἀλλ' ἐν διδασκατοῖς πνεύματος) (1 Cor 2:13–14).

The study of glossolalia in the Bible is a vast field of research. Paul's references to the gift of spiritual speech in association with the situation in Corinth is often read in parallel with the references to speaking in tongues mentioned in Mark 16:17, where Jesus tells the apostles that those who believe in him will speak in new tongues; and Acts 2:6, 10:46 and 19:6, where people who have received the Holy Spirit speak in tongues, a language foreign people of diverse origins could all understand. This spontaneous ability to communicate with foreign people through a holy or angelic language can be viewed as an aspect of wider antique phenomena involving holy words, letters and speech. However, glossolalia was far from a Christian invention. *The Testament of Job*, a first-century apocryphon of the story of Job, describes Job's daughter as speaking in angelic language. The Greeks viewed the language of the gods as alien to humans; thus, if spoken, it would sound like gibberish to human ears, as was the case with the Pythia, the oracle at Delphi, who needed trained priests to interpret her speech as she was possessed by Apollo. Speaking in tongues or while possessed by the gods was an ability assigned to sages and holy figures or one that was spontaneously granted to a few holy people. It was associated with the eighth sphere of the cosmic realm and, as such, it could be viewed as the ultimate objective of those who explored vowel magic pertaining to the structure of the cosmos and its origin in the work of the gods. In the Hermetic text *Poimandres*, the beings in the eighth sphere sing praises to the gods in a language that belongs only to them.³⁸

The Christian phenomenon of glossolalia was surely informed and made more credible through its association with the wider context of letters and sounds, intimately intertwined with the

³⁸ *Poimandres* 26. Trans. Walter Scott, in *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924–1936), 129.

structure of the cosmos and its divine governance. Nevertheless, scholars of the Bible and early Christianity have undoubtedly been hesitant to read early Christian expressions of glossolalia in the context of ancient magical vowel features. In his study of the intricacies of the Corinthian conflict and the legacy of Paul, Dale Martin writes in connection with a discussion of the social meaning of glossolalia that ‘one might include here, though I do not, the function of “nonsense” terms (at least to outsiders if not to insiders) in Gnostic literature and magical papyri’.³⁹ Martin argues that divine or angelic speech was a high-status marker for those who possessed it. His choice to exclude magical vowel features and their ritual aspect is strange, particularly considering that gaining divine speech through exploring vowels would serve to strengthen his hypothesis that glossolalia had high social status and was an ability chiefly showcased among people in leadership roles. Attaining a mastery of divine speech through vowel exploration would only have been possible among those deeply initiated or who had undergone serious study and practice of the rituals and the complexities undergirding them. Yet Martin is far from alone in excluding the relevance of magical vowel features from studies of early Christian glossolalia; indeed, he represents one of the more balanced dismissals.⁴⁰ My point here is not to argue that vowel magic is relevant to discuss in every early Christian setting where holy sounds and words are mentioned, only that the phenomenon should not be automatically disregarded as by definition something un-Christian. Rather, magical vowel features should be approached as an aspect of the broader religious scene involving speculations

³⁹ Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 267 n. 8.

⁴⁰ Andrews, E. ‘Gift of Tongues’, in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. K. R. Crim and G. A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), vol. IV, 671–672; Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987); Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998); Eddie Ensley, *Sounds of Wonder: Speaking in Tongues in the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

about the secrets contained in letters and sounds, which would also have been relevant for and utilised by Christians. To illustrate its relevance for interpreting Christian texts, let us take some examples from those found in the Nag Hammadi library, as some of those in the Valentinian tradition, for example, are well suited to be read in light of references to the power of sounds and letters as gateways to higher truths.⁴¹

In *The Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI,1), for example, some people are portrayed as having access to free-flowing prophetic speech.⁴² This causes strife within the congregation represented in the text, as others became jealous. The congregants asked ‘Why does he speak while I do not?’⁴³ To this the text

⁴¹ The Nag Hammadi codices contain several Christian texts that can be said to belong to the theological heritage associated with Valentinus. These are, conservatively counted, *The Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,2), *The Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5), *The Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI,1), *The Gospel of Philip* (NHC II,3) and *A Valentinian Exposition* (NHC XI,2). The Valentinian texts found within the Nag Hammadi codices represent the largest collection of Valentinian texts extant from antiquity.

⁴² That *The Interpretation of Knowledge* is informed by Paul is accepted by most scholars. Elaine Pagels has studied the text in detail in light of Pauline perspectives in ‘Introduction to *The Interpretation of Knowledge*’, in *Nag Hammadi Codices X, XI, XII*, ed. Hedrick, 21–30; see also Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of The Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1975); Elaine Pagels, ‘Pursuing the Spiritual Eve: Imagery and Hermeneutics in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and the *Gospel of Philip*’, in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1988), 187–206. Here she argues, among other things, that the images of the feminine in ‘Gnostic texts’ are not mere reinterpretations of Genesis but also strongly influenced by Pauline writings.

⁴³ NHC XI, 16:34–35: εὐ περὶ ἄλλων ὡρεθε ἀνακ ἦλε ἡτῷ ὡρεθε ἐν. *The Interpretation of Knowledge* is badly fragmented, especially the first half of the text. My translation here is a modified version of John D. Turner and Elaine Pagels’ transcription and translation in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, ed. Hedrick, 65–66. I have also consulted Uwe-Karsten Plisch, *Die Auslegung der Erkenntnis (Nag-Hammadi-Codex XI,1)* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996); and especially Wolf-Peter Funk, Louis Painchaud and Einar Thomassen, *L’interprétation de la gnose: NH XI, 1* (Quebec: Peeters, 2010); and Einar Thomassen’s English translation, ‘The Interpretation of Knowledge’, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 651–662.

for the Aeon in which the Son is clothed.⁴⁹ This term is often used to refer to the building blocks of the cosmos and the human body, the four elements.⁵⁰ In *The Interpretation of Knowledge* humans ‘were made slaves’ (14:34–35) and will stay thus as long as they are stuck in the ‘garment of condemnation’ and in the body, and will continue to be attacked by evil powers (6:30–32).⁵¹ What separates the elements of the body and the elements of the Aeons are the qualifying words ‘living’ and ‘rational’ (11:36–37). The elements that make up the flesh are irrational (without Logos, without form), what Philo

⁴⁹ In *The Apocryphon of John*, it is Fate/the counterfeit spirit that binds the human to fire, earth, water and air (NHC II, 28:13–32, BG 55). For Paul, humans were slaves to the elements, lower powers and archons before Christ came (Rom 8:38–39; Gal 4:3–9; 1 Cor 15–24. Exactly how ‘the elements of the cosmos’ and the different powers and angels are to be understood in Paul’s epistles is debated. For an overview and one interpretation, see Denzney Lewis, *Cosmology*, chapter 3. For pseudo-Pauline sources see, for example, Eph 2:3 and Col 2:8–20). In Galatians 4:3–5 Paul writes that ‘while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental principles (τὰ στοιχεῖα) of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.’ As we have seen, in 1 Corinthians, the speech of those who have accepted Christ and the holy spirit may possess divine qualities. Something similar is expressed in *The Interpretation of Knowledge* and in all likelihood the Pauline letters are a great influence.

⁵⁰ As in *Excerpts from Theodotus* 81. In *The Apocryphon of John*, the ‘tomb of the body’ is made from ‘earth and water and fire and air’ (BG 55:4–6), and it is this in ‘which they clothed the man as a fetter of matter’ (BG 55:10–13). Plato mainly refers to the four γένη, and the word element (στοιχεῖον) is used for building blocks that are not visible. Further, he maintained that the division into basic elements was pre-Socratic, deriving from Empedocles (Plato, *Timaeus* 48B). Aristotle’s famous categorisation of the cosmos includes the four elements, each characterised by a bodily feature such as hot, cold, dry, wet (*On Generation and Corruption* 328b26–329b25). In the *Orphic Hymns* 5:4 and in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 236–256, the word στοιχεῖα is also used for these four elements. Philo accused pagans of worshipping these στοιχεῖα (*On Abraham* 68–88).

⁵¹ Thomassen, in *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Meyer, 656. The same metaphor is found in Valentinus’ fragment 2, where we are also told to purify our hearts from these lower beings, just as in *The Interpretation of Knowledge* 20:14–23. However, the relation between the fragments of Valentinus and later Valentinianism is a debated topic. See Christoph Markschies, *Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

called ‘lifeless elements’,⁵² which makes them subject to Fate and other lower powers.⁵³ This is only one example of how a Christian text employs precisely the same structures and theoretical ideas that undergirded the magical vowel features found in the Sethian and Hermetic texts discussed above. There are, however, even clearer statements in other Valentinian Nag Hammadi texts.

In *The Gospel of Truth*, for example, the aural and letter imagery is more prominent. At the outset we read that Error is the reason for the cosmic creation. But those who are predestined to salvation, those who are mentioned in ‘the book of the living’, may escape. That which is written in this book ‘are letters of truth which only those speak who know them’ (23:8–10). These people are likened to sheep who have fallen into a pit but who have access to a certain voice, which is designed to call out to the Father: ‘the Father is the sign in their voice’ (πιμλαμνε· ἄπετῆ πογθραυ πε· πιωτ πε πεει) (32:17). Tjitze Baarda has suggested that this sign correlates to the sound made by a sheep – in Greek βῆ – whose numerical value if cried out twice would equal the number one hundred, which is mentioned in the sentence before (the sign of the Father), the sign of

⁵² Philo, *On the Contemplative Life* 3–4.

⁵³ Plato connected the Moirai and Ananke to cosmic motions and the turning of time, describing the Moirai sisters’ work, especially Clotho’s spinning of her wheel, and connecting it to the movement of the seven circles, the turning of the cosmos and of time. Plato also mentions the spindle of Necessity (Ananke) in this passage, ‘on which all the revolutions turn’ (*Republic* X, 616–617). A goddess associated with weaving in Egyptian mythology was the sister of Isis, Nephtys, particularly with regard to the linen grave clothes in which the dead were wrapped (Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 171). Zeno called Fate ‘a moving power’ (δύναμις κινήτικῆ) (SVF 1, 175; 1, 176.) For Hermetic writings, see *Corpus Hermeticum* 12, where we read that all humans are subjected to Fate. For details on Hermetic Fate, see Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology*, chapter 5. For Sethian texts see, for example, *On the Origin of the World* 123.12–18, where Fate is portrayed as a co-worker with the archons and works to enslave the human in the cosmos, a cosmos that ‘wandered astray (πλανηθεῖ) throughout all time’. PHEME PERKINS called Fate in this text ‘like a natural law’. See PHEME PERKINS, ‘On the Origin of the World (CG II, 5): A Gnostic Physics’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 34:1 (1980): 41.

one might read them and think of something foolish, but (rather that) they are letters of the truth, which they alone speak who know them. Each letter is a complete <thought>, like a complete book, since they are letters written by the Unity, the Father having written them for the Aeons, in order that by means of his letters they should know the Father.⁵⁷

ἦΤΕ ΘῆΣΜΗ ΟΥΔΕ ΘῆΣΘΕΕΙ Εἰ ΝΕ·
 ΕΥΨΑΛΤ· ἦΠΟΥΘΡΑΥ ΨΥΜΑ
 ἠΤΕΟΥΕΕΙ ΔΨΟΥ ἦΨΜΕΥΕ
 ΔΥΠΕΤΨΟΥΕΙΤ· ΑΛΛΑ ΘῆΣΘΕΕΙ
 ΝΕ ἦΤΕ †ΜῆΤΜΗΕ ἦΤΑΥ ΕΥΨΕΧΕ
 ΕΥΣΑΥΝΕ ἠΜΑΥ ΟΥΔΕΕΤΟΥ
 ΕΟΥΜΕ(ΕΥΕ) ΕΨΧΗΚ ΠΕ ΠΣΘΕΕΙ
 ΠΣΘΕΕΙ ἠΠΡΗΤΕ ἦΠΟΥΧΩΩΜΕ·
 ΕΨΧΗΚ ΑΒΑΛ· ΕΘῆΣΘΕΕΙ ΝΕ
 ΔΥΣΑΘΟΥ ΑΒΑΛ ΘῆΤΟΟΤ·
 ἦ†ΜῆΤΟΥΕΕΙ· ΕΑΘΑΠΩΤ· ΣΑΘΟΥ
 (ἦ)ἠΙΛΙΩΝ ΨΥΜΑ ΑΒΑΛ· ΘῆΤΟΟΤΟΥ
 ἦἠΙΣΘΕΕΙ ἦΤΟΟΤ· ΕΥΔΟΥΩΝ
 ΠΩΤ·

Throughout *The Gospel of Truth*, great emphasis is placed on the need to manifest one’s salvation through one’s voice, and references to letters and numbers seem to be used in much the same way as in the above Sethian and Hermetic material: to make transcendence more concrete through aural cues.

In *The Tripartite Tractate* we also encounter a certain *voice* (ΣΜΗ) which enables the recipient to come into contact with the Aeons as well as his/her own particular salvific status. Just as in *The Gospel of Truth*, the Aeons are at first unaware of the Father and are thus in disarray. They are granted knowledge of the Father not from reading letters, as in *The Gospel of Truth*, but from a voice (ΣΜΗ), which enabled them to know the Father and the place and nature whence they came. Thus illuminated, we read that the Aeons ‘need no voice and spirit, mind and word’⁵⁸ in their present state. In the cosmos,

⁵⁷ NHC I, 22:38–23:19. Text and trans. Attridge and MacRae, slightly modified, in *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, ed. Attridge, 90–91.

⁵⁸ NHC I, 64:9–10: ΧΕ Μῆ ΧΡΙΑ ἦΣΜΗ Θ[Ι Π]Η(ΕΥΜ)Δ ἦΠΟΥΣ ΔΥΩ ἦΛΟΥΣ[Ο]Σ. Text and trans. Attridge and Elaine Pagels, modified, in *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, ed. Attridge, 212–213.

however, things are very different. Humans are divided into three categories: pneumatics, psychics and material humans. All three live in ignorance before the coming of the Saviour but at his appearance on earth pneumatic people immediately recognise their status as saved individuals. Their task is to spread the word to psychic people who possess the potential for salvation. The material people stand outside; these are people who speak ‘like Greeks’ (ΠΤΥΠΟΣ ΝΗΘΕΛΛΗΗ) (110:25), while the wise among them speak ‘arrogantly and (in an) illusory way concerning the things which they thought of as wisdom’.⁵⁹ The material people are hindered by the archons who rule the cosmos and, therefore, are restricted to knowledge pertaining to the ‘visible elements’ (ΠΙΣΟΙΧΙΟΝ ΕΤΟΥΛΗΘ) (109:22–23). However, through their prophets, the psychics – a category in which Jews are included – have historically been able to speak about things pertaining to a higher level, although unaware of it, since they are guided by angels at a higher level than those only dealing with the visible elements of the cosmos (111:23–113:30). Once the Saviour appears, the pneumatics are awakened and able to instruct the psychics, while the material people are beyond redemption.⁶⁰ The psychics are, thus, instructed aurally by fellow Christians,⁶¹ but the pneumatics are also depicted as receiving teaching, ‘instructed in an invisible manner’ (ΘΗΗ ΟΥ[Μ]ΝΤΑΤΗΕΥ ΑΡΑΟ: ΔΟΥΤΣΕΒΑΥ ΑΡΑΟΥ) (115:1–2) by the Saviour himself. This resembles 1 Corinthians, in which Paul differentiates between ordinary human wisdom and pneumatic teaching, which is without words (1 Cor 2:13–14); *The Tripartite Tractate* seems to have expanded upon this. After one has received instruction, one enters a state of the Aeons where there is

⁵⁹ NHC I, 109:33–35: ΟΥΜΗΤΧΑΟΙΘΗΤ· ΜΗΗ ΟΥΜΕΕΥΕ ΜΦΑΗΤΑΟΙΑ ΘΑ ΠΡΑ ΠΗΕΕΙ ΕΙΤΑΥΜΕΕΥΕ· ΑΡΑΥ ΜΜΗΤΡΜΗΘΗΤ. Text and trans. Attridge and Pagels, modified, in *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, ed. Attridge, 290–291.

⁶⁰ For the deterministic implications of this, see Linjamaa, *The Ethics of The Tripartite Tractate*.

⁶¹ “Through “a voice” or “vocally”” (ΘΥΤΗ ΟΥΟΜΗ) (NHC I, 119:3).

‘no need of voice’ (μη χρεια ἦσμεν) (124:19–20). This is likened to gaining ‘form’ (μορφή).⁶² Several Christian authors portrayed paradise as a place where written and spoken words were not needed, where one was in intuitive contact with God’s mind.⁶³ Nevertheless, reinstating the lost image of God commenced with words, through oral instruction and study.

Carrol Harrison has argued that many early Christian authors made a distinction between inward hearing and outward hearing.⁶⁴ In order to be able to hear the word of God within oneself – to be able to believe, pray and ultimately act in accordance with the will of God – one first needed to receive oral instruction and be baptised.⁶⁵ This context fits the Valentinian material in the Nag Hammadi codices. For example, in *The Tripartite Tractate* the psychics receive baptism and instruction from the pneumatics and have to assent to the trinity and then trust in ‘what has been said to them’ (ἡτελευτησεν ἐνεργον) (128:1); they are thus termed those of ‘the Calling’ (πτωζμε), also echoing Pauline language.⁶⁶ They need to

⁶² Gaining ‘form’ is equal to becoming untangled from the cosmic predicament which befell the humanity at creation. Further into the text we read that ‘the first human was a mixed formation, and a mixed creation, and a deposit of those of the left and those of the right, and a pneumatic rationality’ (κε πωλρη λε ἦρωμε ογπλδσμε πε ερτηρ πε λγω ογτσενο πε ερτηρ πε λγω ογκογ λρη πε ἦλε πδβογρ πε μη πιοημε πε λγω ογπη(εγμ)λτικδς ἦλοσος) (NHC I, 106:18–22). Text and trans. Attridge and Pagels, slightly modified, in *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, ed. Attridge, 284–285. For more on the concept ‘form’, see Linjamaa, *The Ethics of The Tripartite Tractate*, chapter 5.

⁶³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV, 4.2; Origen, *Contra Celsum* I, 48; For references to Ambrose, Augustine, Clement, and for a broader discussion, see Harrison, *The Art of Listening*, chapter 3.

⁶⁴ Harrison, *The Art of Listening*, 61–83.

⁶⁵ To this can be added that some Christians seem to have gone further than others in developing theories and rituals based on the relation between sound and voice in the cosmos vis-à-vis the heavens. One example is Markosian vocal magic, which seems to have been a very intricate system based on similar concepts, whereby one’s mind could be cultivated by harnessing the relationship between heavenly sounds and earthly echoes (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I, 13–17).

⁶⁶ 1 Cor 1:9, 7:15–24; Gal 1:6–15, 5:8, 13; 1 Thes 2:12, 4:7, 5:24; 2 Thes 1:11, 2:14; Col 3:15; Eph 4:4; Rom 8:30, 9:24–26.

be provided with words and oral instruction, which, once received, elevate them above cosmic words: the psychics ‘will receive the vision more and more by nature and not only by a little word, so as to believe, only through a voice, that this is the way it is, that the restoration to that which used to be is a unity’.⁶⁷ It is the Logos who structures the heavenly world, where the pneumatics will be granted eternal repose. The Demiurge creates the cosmos but is guided by the Logos, which enables the Logos to step down to earth in order to awaken the pneumatic people (100:31–35). For this purpose, again from *The Tripartite Tractate*, he uses ‘spiritual words’ (ἡθῆρωε̅ξε̅ ξε̅ μ̅πι(ε̅υ̅μ̅)α̅τ̅ικ̅ον) (101:15–16). As Einar Thomassen has observed, the way these spiritual words, and the voice the pneumatics’ possess which gives them access to the structures of heaven, remind us of how the words of the world and the heavens are differentiated in *The Gospel of Philip*, another Nag Hammadi text often attributed to the Valentinian tradition.

The Gospel of Philip also contains references to Colossians 4:6 which makes a distinction between speech ‘seasoned with salt’ (ἄλατι ἡρτυμένος) and more colloquial and mundane speech: ‘The apostles said to the disciples, “May our entire offering obtain salt”. They called [Sophia] “salt”. Without it, no offering [is] acceptable. But Sophia is barren, [without] child. For this reason, she is called “a trace of salt”.’⁶⁸ Here, wisdom is likened to the ingredient elevating mundane speech. Thus, when one addressed God, it was not

⁶⁷ NHC I, 133:1–7: σ̅ε̅να̅ξι̅ π̅νε̅υ̅ ἡ̅γα̅ρ̅ ἡ̅ρο̅νο̅ ἡ̅ρο̅νο̅ θ̅ῆ̅ν̅ ο̅υ̅φ̅υ̅σι̅ς̅ θ̅ῆ̅ν̅ ο̅υ̅ψ̅ε̅ξε̅ ψ̅υ̅μ̅ι̅ ο̅υ̅α̅ε̅ε̅τ̅ῆ̅ ἐ̅ν̅ ἀ̅τ̅ρο̅υ̅η̅α̅ρ̅τ̅ε̅ ο̅υ̅α̅ε̅ε̅τ̅ῆ̅ θ̅ῆ̅τ̅η̅ ο̅υ̅σ̅μ̅η̅ ξε̅ π̅ε̅ι̅ π̅ε̅ π̅ῆ̅ν̅τ̅ε̅ ἐ̅τ̅ψ̅ο̅ο̅π̅ ξε̅ ο̅υ̅ε̅ι̅ ἡ̅ο̅υ̅ω̅τ̅ δ̅ε̅ ἴ̅δ̅ο̅κ̅α̅τ̅α̅σ̅τ̅α̅σι̅ς̅ ἄ̅ρ̅ο̅ν̅η̅ ἀ̅π̅ε̅τ̅ε̅ν̅ε̅ε̅ψ̅ο̅ο̅π̅. Text and trans. Attridge and Pagels, modified, in *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, ed. Attridge, 328–329.

⁶⁸ NHC II, 59:27–33: π̅ε̅ξε̅ ἡ̅π̅ο̅σ̅τ̅ο̅λ̅ο̅ς̅ ἡ̅ἡ̅μ̅μ̅α̅θ̅ῆ̅τ̅η̅ς̅ ξε̅ τ̅ῆ̅ π̅ρ̅ο̅σ̅φ̅ο̅ρ̅α̅ τ̅ῆ̅ρ̅ε̅ μ̅α̅ρ̅ε̅σ̅χ̅η̅ [ἡ̅]̅α̅ς̅ ἡ̅ο̅υ̅θ̅μ̅ο̅υ̅η̅ε̅υ̅μ̅ο̅υ̅τ̅ε̅ [ε̅τ̅σ̅ο̅φ̅ι̅]̅α̅ ξε̅ θ̅μ̅ο̅υ̅ ἀ̅χ̅η̅τ̅ῆ̅μ̅α̅ρ̅ε̅ π̅ρ̅ο̅σ̅φ̅[ο̅ρ̅α̅ ψ̅ω̅]̅π̅ε̅ ε̅ψ̅υ̅μ̅η̅ τ̅σ̅ο̅φ̅ι̅α̅ δ̅ε̅ ο̅υ̅σ̅τ̅ε̅ρ̅[α̅ τ̅ε̅ ἀ̅χ̅ῆ̅]̅ ψ̅ῆ̅ρ̅ε̅ δ̅ι̅α̅ τ̅ο̅υ̅τ̅ο̅ ε̅υ̅μ̅ο̅υ̅τ̅ε̅ ἐ̅ρ̅ο̅[ς̅ ξε̅ π̅κ̅ε̅]σ̅ε̅ρ̅ε̅ ἡ̅θ̅μ̅ο̅υ̅. Text and trans. Wesley W. Isenberg, modified, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2–7, vol. I, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1989), 158–159.

enough to use everyday speech, it had to be an enlightened, illuminated and full of wisdom (salt) to be effective.

In conclusion, there are several magical vowel aspects that would have been well received in Christian texts, of which the Valentinian material is a good example. Several Valentinian texts, like *A Valentinian Exposition* (Codex XI,2), *The Interpretation of Knowledge* (Codex XI,1) and others, highlight a concept that is apparent in some of the Sethian and Hermetic material as well: silence as associated with God.⁶⁹ This is not at odds with the notion that aurality was effective, as the structure on earth containing sounds that can be heard with human ears was by definition something other or lesser than the reality in heaven. What should be clear by now is the similarity in intellectual context between those ideas that form the backdrop of the practice of vowel recitation and Valentinian ideas concerning the use of spiritual speech. In both Sethian and Hermetic literature, the enlightened person speaks in a silent and secret way to God, a speech that glorifies the Father of silence and results in transcending the cosmic restrictions, giving access to the heavens in which beings live whose existence centres around giving praise to the Father. Speech in the world is aural by definition, which is why God and the spiritual speech attached to him is repeatedly described as silent. In *Marsanes* and *The Trimorphic Protennoia* the highest being is called the ‘silent one’. In *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, we read that ‘He is perfect, the invisible God to whom one speaks in silence.’⁷⁰ The angels sing to God in silence, just as the mystagogue is advised to do. Again, from *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*: ‘I am silent, O my Father. I want to sing a hymn to you

⁶⁹ See also NHC I, *The Tripartite Tractate* 55:35–38, 57:1–8; NHC I, *The Gospel of Truth* 36:39–37:13; NHC XI, *Valentinian Exposition* 22:27, 23:22.

⁷⁰ NHC VI, 56:9–12: εφεῖ θλ οὐσι μιμ· εφμερ· πριουτε η̅δ̅θρατος ετοϋυλαζε εροϋ θ̅η̅ ογκαρϋϋ. Text and trans. Brashler et al., in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2–5 and VI*, ed. Parrott, 354–355.

while I am silent.⁷¹ This silent speech is associated with the vowels.

However, the Valentinian material is not the only Christian context in which vowel magic would have been received with understanding, and, dare I say, enthusiasm.

Divine Speech and Holy Words in a Monastic Context

What does monastic literature have to say regarding holy words, powerful vowels spoken in silence and the possibility to intermingle with beings of the heavens by transcending the structure of materiality? Would monks have found the Hermetic, Sethian and Valentinian reflections on these aspects ‘nonsense’ (as Martin puts it)? Indeed, as will become evident shortly, monastic sources are full of references to a secret language and creative approaches toward the alphabet.

In the burgeoning monastic context, spiritual knowledge was seen as separate from the educational undertakings and schooling belonging to worldly affairs.⁷² As recent scholarship has indicated, references like these have led early scholars to view monastic learning as different from classical *paideia*.⁷³ Yet the scholarship has also highlighted the continuation of classical ideals and practices of *paideia* within the monasteries, and rather view references to

⁷¹ NHC VI, 58:24–26: †καρλετ ὦ πλειωτ †ογωω εβρωμμη ειροκ ειικαρλετ. Text and trans. Brashler et al., in *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI*, ed. Parrott, 360–361.

⁷² *Arsenius* 5–6; *Mark the Disciple of Abba Silvanus* 10. Trans. Benedicta Ward, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, rev. edn (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984). The reference to worldly knowledge and monastic ideals in Arsenius is discussed by Lilian Larsen, “On Learning a New Alphabet”: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and the Monostichs of Menander, in *Studia Patristica 55: Papers Presented at the Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 2011*, ed. Markus Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 59–77.

⁷³ Henri Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*. Trans. George Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956).

spiritual knowledge and the ideal of being uneducated in worldly affairs as constructed archetypes enabling monastic practices to be made exclusive.⁷⁴ As I wish to indicate here, not only were monastic approaches to study and learning were a continuation of the ideals and curricula attached to classical *paideia* (discussed in more detail in Chapter 7), but they also provided a language which separated monastic practice from the affairs of the outside world. Here, the references to secret languages and other forms of alphabet manipulation are central, echoing the endeavour to master a different kind of communication directed at God and the angels.

The most striking example of the belief in the mystical powers of letters comes from a Pachomian context. In the sixth letter in the collection of the *Letters of Pachomius* (preserved only in Latin), the founder of the Pachomian movement himself addresses the monastic Father Sourous and his housemate John, and states the following:

I want you to understand the characters that you wrote to me and that I wrote to you in answer, and how important it is to know all the elements of the spiritual alphabet. Write ν above η and θ ; write ζ above χ , μ , λ and ι , when you have finished reading these characters. I wrote to you so that you might understand the mysteries of the characters. Do not write ν above χ , θ and μ ; but rather write ζ above χ , and ν above η and θ . As soon as I received the characters you wrote, I wrote back and to mysterious [words] I also answered in sacred [words]. I noticed indeed that the characters of your letter were η and θ ; therefore I also understood the meaning and the words in the same manner, so I could be even with your understanding, lest you suffer some loss from us. Therefore I wrote to you $\zeta\phi\upsilon\mu$, lest perhaps someone might say that my name is not written $\zeta\phi\upsilon\mu$. And

⁷⁴ Rafaela Criboire, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Larsen and Rubenson (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity*.

do not say: we can write $\chi\eta$, for you said indeed that it is written this way. Now, therefore, $\varsigma\theta\mu\lambda\omicron\upsilon\sigma\sigma\upsilon\lambda\iota\lambda$. Behold, I wrote to you also χ , complete and perfect all around. You write χ and ϕ , so that you can write ς and μ . Behold, θ is written before them. Let it be enough for you to take κ and τ , in case you are to go forth. We have written to you μ because of your labor, so that you might be able show every solicitude before you depart. We have indeed the same care as you have and we did not write κ and τ . I wrote to you μ . Therefore, when you see κ and τ written, write ζ in answer; when you see ς and ϕ , write ν ; when you see η and θ , write μ ; when you see $\lambda\iota\lambda$ write χ ; when you see $\upsilon\sigma\upsilon$, write χ . Therefore, now, do not write $\kappa\rho$ in these days, because we found δ written. As for us, we wrote $\varsigma\phi$. Take care of α . This is indeed what is written in these days; and be attentive to Q and T , which are Egyptian characters called *bei* and *thei*. We found Q and T written, which are Egyptian characters called *hore* and *thei*. Therefore take care of η and write α , because I gave it to you for η ; write also ς because it is written τ and δ so that you be able to come to us. Be careful not to forget to write ψ above κ , because it is written first, then, and ρ is written before it; and least you say that θ is written and a part of χ . Therefore, the whole thing is written β , lest you say γ is written. In every letter that I wrote to you there is something about your residing as well as rising above the shadow of the exterior world, which is outside the wall. The smell of your wisdom has reached us and has compelled us to write you these things. As for you, as wise men, understand what I wrote to you and prove yourselves to be such as my word has directed.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ *Pachomian Koinonia*, 3 vols., trans. Armand Veilleux (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982), vol. III, 67–68. I follow Veilleux in all except his translation of ‘In omni epistula quam scripsi uobis de uestra sessione continetur, et de resurrectione et umbra atenmuralis, quae est extra murum’, which he renders as ‘In every letter that I wrote to you there is something about your sitting and rising above the shade of exterior wall, which is outside the wall.’ Latin from Amand Boon, *Pachomiana Latina* (Brussels: Éditions Nauwelaerts, 1932), 92–95. For a discussion of the authenticity and dating of the letters, see Hans Quecke, *Die Briefe Pachoms* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1974), 96–108.

Pachomius' letter is very cryptic.⁷⁶ Christoph Joest has studied these aspects of Pachomius' letters and tried to solve what he suggests is a cipher. He shows rather convincingly that Pachomius employed a code language in much of his letter correspondence, one where whole key words or nominal phrases were contracted to single letters:⁷⁷ for example, θ could be code for God ($\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$) or Dead ($\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$), α could refer to beginning or redemption ($\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi\acute{\eta}$) and so on. It would have been hard to decipher the letters without access to a list of which letters refer to which words or phrases. Joel Kalvesmaki has questioned some points of Joest's suggested solution: for example, that all the letters used the same code, which does not seem to make sense across the board of Pachomius' letters, or that the Coptic letters which Pachomius also used are not part of his overall schema but rather used when Greek does not give the answer.⁷⁸ Lundhaug and Jenott have previously noted these and other mentions of Pachomian proclivities towards secretive script, and read them in tandem with codes found in the Nag Hammadi codices.⁷⁹ It would undoubtedly be interesting to apply these codes in a more systematic way to the cases of cryptic writing in the Nag Hammadi texts. While previous scholars have been preoccupied with cracking Pachomius' cipher, there is more to Pachomius' use of code language that

⁷⁶ For an overview of the use of secret language in Pachomius' writings and early monasticism, see Quecke, *Die Briefe Pachoms*, 18–40. He does not introduce the Nag Hammadi texts into his discussion.

⁷⁷ Christoph Joest, 'Die Pachomanische Geheimschrift im Spiegel der Hieronymus-übersetzung', *Le Muséon* 112:1–2 (1999): 21–46.

⁷⁸ Joel Kalvesmaki, 'Pachomius and the Mystery of the Letters', in *Ascetic Culture: Essays in Honor of Philip Rousseau*, ed. Blake Leyerle and Robin Darling Young (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 11–28. Joest defends his hypothesis and answers Kalvesmaki in Christoph Joest, 'Prinzipien der Entschlüsselung von Pachoms, "Geheimschrift"', *Journal of Coptic Studies* 24 (2022): 181–201.

⁷⁹ For example, in Codex VII and Codex VIII Lundhaug and Jenott point out that one can find cryptograms, like the $\text{IX}\Theta\Upsilon\text{Z}$ code, also common in the monastic milieu. Lundhaug and Jenott, *Monastic Origins*, 194–197.

goes beyond merely cipherring texts to keep them from being read by outsiders.

I would like to bring the vowel constellations into the discussion, to add a nuance to what Pachomius is doing apart from being cautious in his correspondence. Some words are not just neutral signifiers, but ‘sacred’ and ‘mysterious’. These characters are written, as Pachomius says, in the ‘elements of the spiritual alphabet’ (*spiritalis alfabeti elementa*), enabling the reader to gain information regarding ‘residing as well as rising above the shadow of the exterior world’ (*continetur, et de resurrectione et umbra atenmurali*). In the Greek *Life of Pachomius*, we read that Pachomius wrote in a ‘secret language’ (γλῶσσα κρύπτη),⁸⁰ a spiritual language which pertained to ‘the governance of souls’ (99), writing, we are told, ‘the names of the characters from α to ω’ (99).⁸¹ This was knowledge not meant for all, because not everyone had what it took to understand it. This fits well into the context of the Latin Letter 6 quoted above, but also echoes the same deterministic language we have encountered in *The Tripartite Tractate*. As Armand Veilleux has stated, ‘The use of series of vowels and nonsense syllables is not rare either in the gnostic documents discovered in 1946 at Nag Hammadi, near the great basilica of St Pachomius at Phbow, and there could be some similarity or affinity between the two.’⁸²

The Pachomian monastery seems to have been organised in accordance with a system based on letters of the Greek alphabet. In *The Life of Pachomius*, we read that an angel visited Pachomius and commanded him to designate each monk with a letter from α to τ. The angel also commanded the monks to recite passages from The Book of Psalms and to sing antiphons

⁸⁰ *The Greek Life of Pachomius* 99. François Halkin, *Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1932).

⁸¹ *Pachomian Koinonia*, trans. Veilleux, vol. I, 366.

⁸² *Pachomian Koinonia*, trans. Veilleux, vol. III, 5.

(Greek ἀντίφωνον, ἀντί ‘opposite’ and φωνή ‘voice’), short chants sung as a refrain. In *The History of Macarius the Alexandrian*, we read that Macarius used to chant twenty-four antiphons, repeatedly.⁸³ This was a way to harmonise with the heavenly sounds which transcended the limitations of the body. It aided the monks in times of doubt, fear and crisis, a silent joining with the holy sounds and beings in heaven.⁸⁴

There are other indicators in monastic literature suggesting an interest in sacred words and sounds. The metaphor in Colossians 4:6 of speech seasoned with salt, which we encountered in *The Gospel of Philip*, is often used in the Pachomian literature.⁸⁵ The conviction that the most divine and spiritual words were spoken in silence – which we encounter in the Valentinian, Sethian and Hermetic texts – was a common monastic ideal. In Palladius’ *Lausiatic History* we read of an episode of a novice monk asking an elder about the abilities of reclusive monks:

The brethren said, ‘Why is it that certain of the Fathers were called “men who transferred themselves from one place to another”, since they were recluses, and never departed from their cells?’ The old man said, ‘Because after much silent contemplation, and unceasing prayer, and watching of the mind, they were worthy to depart from the earth in their minds, and to ascend unto heaven to Christ the King. And they did not do this on occasions only, but continually, for whensoever they wished, or whensoever they sang the Psalms, or prayed, or meditated upon God, straightway their mind was exalted to heaven, and stood before our Lord.’⁸⁶

⁸³ Palladius, *Lausiatic History* 17. In *The Book of Paradise*, trans. Budge, vol. I, 170.

⁸⁴ Palladius, *Lausiatic History* 2, 4. In *The Book of Paradise*, trans. Budge, vol. I, 439, 443.

⁸⁵ *Pachomian Koinonia*, trans. Veilleux, vol. I, 26–27; vol. III, 8, 17.

⁸⁶ Palladius, *Lausiatic History*, *Questions of the Brethren* 17, in *The Book of Paradise*, trans. Budge, vol. II, 1012.

Silent speaking and recitation gave monks ‘the power to pray without ceasing’,⁸⁷ a practice mentioned and revered throughout the monastic world.⁸⁸ Palladius records another sage monk who tells his pupils that ‘When thou prayest say with a hidden voice unto God: “Lord, how am I to acquire Thee?”’⁸⁹

The power of letters and spiritual words lived on in the Egyptian monastic context for a long time. In a Coptic text dated to AD 985, ascribed to John Chrysostom, we still find traces of the importance placed on the power of vowels and letters. The text was produced (commissioned?) by a man named Michael and presented to the monastery of Saint Mercurius in the mountains of the city Tbo in order to get Pachomius and John Chrysostom to pray on Michael’s behalf. It has been given the title *An Encomium on John the Baptist by John Chrysostom* and retells events that occurred after John the Baptist’s death, how Jesus honours him and performs wonders in his memory. In the text, we read that John the Baptist’s name is a ‘medicine and remedy which heals sicknesses of every kind’.⁹⁰ His father, we are told, was made mute by his conception, but at his birth he was asked what to call the newborn:

he made a sign with his hand whereby he asked for a writing tablet, and he wrote these three letters which are wonder-worthy, namely

⁸⁷ Palladius, *Lausiaca History, Questions of the Brethren* 22, in *The Book of Paradise*, trans. Budge, vol. II, 1017.

⁸⁸ One monk asks a senior Father, ‘Who is truly the man of “ascetic excellence”?’, in response to which he is told ‘He who at all times crieth out that he is a sinner, and asketh mercy from the Lord, whose speech beareth the sense of discretion, whose feelings bear the excellence of works, who though silent yet speaketh, and who though speaking yet holdeth his peace.’ *Questions of the Brethren* 90, in *The Book of Paradise*, trans. Budge, vol. II, 1016.

⁸⁹ Palladius, *On the Ascetic Life*, 419, in *The Book of Paradise*, trans. Budge, vol. II, 946.

⁹⁰ John Chrysostom, *An Encomium on John the Baptist by John Chrysostom*, 2a trans E. A. Wallis Budge, in *Coptic Apocrypha*, ed. Budge (London, 1913), 336.

iota, and omega, and alpha. And whilst he was writing his mouth opened suddenly, and his tongue was set free, and he spake, and he gained strength, and he cried out with a loud voice, 'John is his name.'⁹¹

These letters form the first three words of John's name as well as the powerful divine name IAO, popular throughout Egypt.⁹²

Let us conclude the proceeding explorations concerning the interest in magical vowel features encountered in the Nag Hammadi codices and how they fit into a monastic context.

Conclusion

Previous scholars have pointed out that aspects of the non-Christian texts in the Nag Hammadi library, like the Hermetic ones, would have resonated well within Pachomian monasticism.⁹³ One example of theologoumena found in plenitude in the non-Christian material in the Nag Hammadi library that would certainly have resonated in a Pachomian context regards the use of magical letters and words. This chapter has tried to address the question of how the material and contextual features of the many references to magical vowels and words in the Nag Hammadi codices would have been familiar in a Christian context, more specifically,

⁹¹ John Chrysostom, *An Encomium on John the Baptist*, 2a, 336.

⁹² In a related Coptic apocryphon, *The Book of the Resurrection by Bartholomew the Apostle*, the name Iao is written in red ink, together with the name Jesus and the words spoken by God. Trans. Budge, in *Coptic Apocrypha*, xv.

⁹³ Christian Bull argues that there are aspects of the story of a demon punishing disobedient souls found in the last text of Codex VI, called *The Perfect Discourse*, that bears resemblances to both Hermetic and monastic versions of a similar character. Christian Bull, 'The Great Demon of the Air and the Punishment of Souls: *The Perfect Discourse* (NHC VI, 8) and Hermetic and Monastic Demonologies', in *Nag Hammadi à 70 ans: Qu'avons nous appris? / Nag Hammadi at 70: What Have We Learned?*, ed. Eric Crégheur, Louis Painchaud and Tuomas Rasimus (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 105–120.

a monastic one. Examining the vowel constellations in the Nag Hammadi codices from a material and visual perspective would indicate that they were chiefly used for reference, rather than as actual ritual manuals by the monastic owners of the texts, because they are not highlighted in any manner that would suggest the latter. They do not stand out in the document; they are not marked in any way whatsoever that would enable easier access or legibility in a ritual context (as in PGM). Rather, the vowel constellations appear along with the rest of the narrative, without use of margins or spaces. So, for what purposes were they read?

As Armand Veilleux writes, ‘The use of series of vowels and nonsense syllables is not rare either in the gnostic documents discovered in 1946 at Nag Hammadi, near the great basilica of St Pachomius at Phbow, and there could be some similarity or affinity between the two.’⁹⁴ Fredrik Wisse wrote in 1979 that the monks would have found these texts of great interest due to these precise features, and Lundhaug and Jenott have also pointed out the great interest Pachomian monks showed in ‘cryptograms’, codes, secret language and holy symbols.⁹⁵ I agree. The above discussion contributes to explicating this further. A Pachomian monk, at least if the legacy of Pachomius is a point of reference, would not have found these aspects of the Nag Hammadi texts alien. On the contrary, both operate with the same broader intellectual world view of Egyptian Hellenism, where the cosmos was seen as interlinked with the spiritual world. Transcending the ‘shadow of the exterior world’, as Pachomius writes, was a principal aim for the monastic, as well as for the mystagogue initiated in a Hermetic, Sethian or Valentinian setting – and the

⁹⁴ *Pachomian Koinonia*, trans. Veilleux, vol. III, 5.

⁹⁵ Fredrik Wisse, ‘Language Mysticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts and in Early Coptic Monasticism I: Cryptography’, *Enchoria* 9 (1979): 103; Lundhaug and Jenott, *Monastic Origins*, 194–197.

alphabet was utilised and made to represent the same ritual backdrop: human words and sounds could be used to transcend the earthly structure of elements and bring one's spirit into the company of a heavenly choir, lauding God in an eternal symphony of silence.